Colorectal Cancer Screening During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Briefing for Navigators

This document provides an overview of current guidance about colorectal cancer screening and other cancer screenings during the COVID-19 pandemic. This resource is intended to help guide patient navigators and clinical teams, please consult the links below for state and federal guidance as the situation evolves.

Should people still get colorectal cancer screening and other cancer screenings during pandemics?

In general, all cancer screenings that require a screening exam in a healthcare facility, such as colonoscopies and mammograms, are suspended until the pandemic is managed.

- The federal government and several state governments and professional associations are recommending or requiring that healthcare facilities postpone all elective procedures (i.e., scheduled procedures), except in the case of patients whose condition cannot wait until the healthcare system returns to normal operations.
- Colorado Governor Polis issued an Executive Order directing all voluntary and elective procedures to be suspended. Rural and Critical Access Hospitals are exempt from this order, but are “strongly advised to follow this guidance.” For those outside of Colorado, the Ambulatory Surgery Center Association (ASCA) is maintaining a webpage with each state’s directives and guidance regarding elective procedures.
- Navigators should keep in touch with their medical directors and leadership about the protocol for communication with gastroenterology providers and patients regarding timeline for rescheduling colonoscopies.

What about options for colorectal cancer screening that do not require an in-person exam?

Not all colorectal cancer screening methods require an exam in a healthcare facility. Stool-based tests (FIT, FOBT, and Stool-DNA) can be completed in the privacy of the patient’s home and may be an appropriate option for average-risk patients. Speak to your medical director and teams before implementing stool based testing while COVID-19 elective procedures are suspended.

- Stool-based tests are not recommended for patients with a family history of colorectal cancer or polyps, or a personal history of colorectal cancer, polyps or inflammatory bowel disease.
- Patients should discuss their eligibility for stool-based testing with their healthcare team and contactless options for receiving and returning stool tests, such as through mail.
- Please note that patients who receive a positive result from a stool-based test must complete a follow-up colonoscopy. Patients with a positive result should follow-up with their provider immediately, although some follow-up colonoscopies may be delayed due to COVID-19.

If a patient is experiencing signs and symptoms of colorectal cancer: What should they do?

People experiencing signs and symptoms of colorectal cancer such as rectal bleeding, persistent abdominal discomfort, or a change in bowel habits should contact their primary care physician or gastroenterologist (GI doctor) immediately.

- Providers will recommend a course of action for the patient and may be able to set up a telehealth visit with the patient to discuss.
- Some patients may require a diagnostic colonoscopy. It is important for navigators to know current protocols for patients requiring diagnostic exams.

Resources:

- COVID-19 Toolkit and Resources for PNs/CHWs – Patient Navigation Training Collaborative
- Implementing Stool Based Testing Webinar Series Recordings and Slides – Colorado Cancer Screening Program
- Coronavirus and Cancer Screening and Treatment: Expert Insight for Patients – Fight Colorectal Cancer