

# Could Colorectal Cancer in My Family be Hereditary?

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Some colorectal cancer is hereditary (passed down through a family). In hereditary cancer there is a change in a gene, called a mutation that can be passed from parent to child. This genetic change increases a person's risk of colorectal and other cancers.

There are special screening guidelines for people who are at risk for hereditary colorectal cancer so polyps can be found before they turn into colon cancer. There are also screening guidelines to address the risk of the other cancers that may be seen in addition to colon cancer.

## What are the signs that colorectal cancer may be hereditary?

- People who have colorectal cancer at an early age (less than 50).
- People with colon polyps at an early age (less than 40).
- Families with several close relatives who have had certain types of cancer like colon, rectal, uterine, ovarian, small bowel, stomach or urinary tract cancers.
- One person with more than one type of the cancers listed above.
- A family member who has had genetic testing and a gene change was found.

## Why is it important to know if my colorectal cancer is hereditary?

If you already have cancer, knowing if your cancer is hereditary may not change your treatment plan. However, you may need to be screened for other cancers that you have a risk of developing. If your colorectal cancer is hereditary, that will increase the risk of other family members developing cancer. At risk family members could then follow guidelines to detect cancer early or reduce the risk of cancer developing.

**What are your questions? Please ask.  
We are here to help you.**

## **How can I be referred for a genetic assessment?**

The first step is to speak with your doctor about your personal and family history of cancer and if a genetic assessment would be right for you. The assessment would be done by the Maritime Hereditary Cancer Service at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax. Some patients have telephone appointments while others may need a face to face appointment. Face to face appointments can happen in person or by video conference so patients do not need to travel to Halifax.

## **How will my doctor decide if I need a genetic assessment?**

Your doctor will ask you about the types of cancers you and your family have had, the age people were when they first had cancer and the age of any family members who died of cancer. Your doctor will use this information and your health history to decide if you should be referred for a genetic assessment. Since not all colorectal cancer is hereditary, most individuals with colorectal cancer will not need a genetic assessment.

If you are referred for an assessment you will be mailed a one page family health history form to complete before your appointment is booked. It is important that you try to complete the form as fully as possible. If you have questions about filling out the form call the number on the form.

## **If I have cancer now or have had it before should I be referred for genetic assessment?**

As it can take time to get an appointment, whether you are currently in treatment for colorectal cancer or had colorectal cancer in the past, you can ask your doctor if your cancer could be hereditary.

## **Why can't I just have the genetic test?**

Most colorectal cancers are not hereditary so everyone does not need a genetic assessment. Not every person who is referred for a genetic assessment is appropriate for genetic testing.

When a family is appropriate for genetic testing, it is important that the best person is tested. Certain signs, like the age people were when they first had cancer, help identify the best person in a family to test. The person who is initially referred for a genetic assessment may not be the person who is tested.

## **Where can I find out more about hereditary cancers and genetic assessment?**

Ask your doctor about your risk of having a hereditary cancer.

The IWK website has some helpful information about genetic assessment, visit <http://www.iwk.nshealth.ca/childrens-health/services#/mmgs>.

You can also find information on the Canadian Cancer Society's website, visit [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca). Type "Genetic Risk and Cancer" or "Risk factors for Colorectal Cancer" in the search box. Or, call their Cancer Information Service 1-888-939-3333.

The National Cancer Institute's website also has reliable information, visit [www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/genetics](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/genetics).

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