Cancer strikes people of all ages, but you are more likely to get cancer as you get older, even if no one in your family has had it. The good news is that as death rates are going down. No matter what your age, the chances of surviving cancer are better today than ever before. Cancer Facts for People Over 50 National Institute on Aging

What changes in your health, you should see a doctor as soon as possible. Don’t wait to feel pain or other early stages, cancer usually doesn’t cause pain.

What Regular Tests Should I Have?

It is important to have regular tests to check for cancer long before you might notice anything wrong. Checking for cancer when you don’t have symptoms is called screening. Screening may involve a physical exam, lab tests, or tests to look at internal organs.

Medicare covers a number of screening tests for cancer. For more information, call the Medicare toll-free help line at 888-633-4227.

Early treatment often can shrink or destroy the tumor and stop it from spreading. It can help prevent pain. When cancer is found early, treatment is more likely to work. Even if treatment cannot cure cancer or destroy the tumor and stop it from growing and spreading, it may help to get regular checkups and to know the symptoms of cancer.

What Should I Watch For?

Cancer can cause many different symptoms. Here are some things to watch for:

✦ A thickening or lump in the breast or any other part of the body

✦ A new mole or a change in an existing mole

✦ A sore that does not heal

✦ Hoarseness or a cough that does not go away

✦ Changes in bowel or bladder habits

✦ Unusual bleeding or discharge

✦ Feeling weak or very tired

Most often, these symptoms are not due to cancer. They may be caused by non-cancerous (benign) tumors or other problems. If you are having any of these symptoms or other symptoms is called screening. Screening may involve a physical exam, lab tests, or tests to look at internal organs.

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Before recommending a screening test, your doctor will ask about your age, past medical problems, family medical problems, general health, and other factors. You may want to talk to your concerns or questions with your doctor so that together you can weigh the pros and cons of screening tests.

If you are 50 or older, the following is a list of some screening tests that check for some specific cancers:

**Breast Cancer:**
Clinical Breast Exam—During a clinical breast exam, a doctor or other health care professional checks the breasts and underarms for lumps or other changes that could be a sign of breast cancer. Although primarily diagnosed in women, breast cancer can happen to men as well.

**Cervical Cancer:**
Pap Test—the doctor gently scrapes cells from the cervix (the lower part of the uterus or womb) and vagina. The cells are sent to a lab to see if they are abnormal. The NCI recommends that women in their 40s and older should have a screening Pap smear every 1 to 2 years. Cervical Cancer Pap Test—The doctor puts a gloved finger into the rectum and feels the prostate through the wall of the rectum. If the doctor feels hard or lumpy areas, they may be a sign of cancer. Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in American men, especially men over age 65. Research- ers are working to find the best screening test for prostate cancer.

**Prostate Cancer:**
 PSA test—PSA (prostate specific antigen) levels are used by doctors to check for prostate cancer. The PSA is a substance (antigen) made by tissues in the prostate gland. It is found in the seminal fluid (fluid from the prostate gland) that mixes with semen and carries sperm. If the PSA level is higher than average, it may mean that prostate cancer cells are present. PSA levels also may be high in men who have other prostate problems.

Routine exams of the skin that can help find skin cancer early. Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States. If a screening test does show a growth or abnormal change, it
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✦ Unusual bleeding or discharge
✦ Feeling weak or very tired
✦ Persistent cough

Most often, these symptoms are not caused to cancer. They may be caused by non-cancerous (benign) tumors or other problems. If you are having any of these symptoms or other changes in your health, you should see a doctor as soon as possible.

Don’t wait to feel pain. In its early stages, cancer usually doesn’t cause pain.

What Regular Tests Should I Have?

It is important to have regular tests to check for cancer long before you might notice anything wrong. Check-in with your doctor when you have symptoms is called screening. Screening may involve a physical exam, lab tests, or tests to look at internal organs.

Medicare now covers a number of screening tests for cancer. For more information, call the Medicare toll-free help line at 800-635-4227.

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Cervical and Other Cancers: Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) Test—measures the amount of PSA in the blood. If the PSA level is higher than average, it may suggest you have prostate cancer cells present. PSA levels also may be high in men who have other prostate problems. Researchers are studying ways to make the PSA test more accurate.

Skin Cancer: Skin Exams—are routine exams of the skin that can help detect skin cancer early. Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States.

Current and past smokers are more likely to get cancer as they get older, even if no one in your family has had it. The good news is that today’s death rates are going down. No matter what your age, the chances of surviving cancer are better today than ever before.

What Is Cancer?
Cancer causes more deaths than any other disease—across all ages and all races. But it doesn’t have to. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States. Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States.

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Cancer Facts for People Over 50

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What Is Cancer?

There are many kinds of cancer but what your age, the chances of surviving cancer are better today than ever before.

What Symptoms Should I Watch For?

Cancer can cause many different symptoms. Here are some things to watch for:

✦ A thickening or lump in the breast or skin
✦ A sore that does not heal
✦ Hoarseness or a cough that does not go away
✦ Changes in bowel or bladder habits
✦ Discomfort after eating
✦ Changes in the way you look or feel
✦ Lumps or other growths in your body
✦ A change in the way you bleed or discharge
✦ Changes in the skin, such as a new mole or a change in an existing mole
✦ A blood in the urine

What Regular Tests Should I Have?

It is important to have regular tests to check for cancer long before you might notice anything wrong. Checking for cancer when you don’t have symptoms is called screening. Screening may involve a physical exam, lab tests, or tests to look at internal organs.

Cancer can cause many different symptoms. Here are some things to watch for:

Early treatment often can shrink or cure some kinds of cancer. Although primarily diagnosed in women, breast cancer can happen to men as well.

Bleeding or discharge may mean that prostate cancer cells have spread to the lymph nodes, liver, bones, or other organs. A blood in the urine may be a sign of prostate cancer.

Unusual bleeding or discharge:

✦ Recommendation: Screen for colorectal cancer if you are 50 or older. The National Colorectal Cancer Roundtable recommends a screening test for colorectal cancer. For more information, call the Colorectal Cancer Roundtable at 1-888-633-4227.

What Causes Cancer?

Cancer can cause many different symptoms. Here are some things to watch for:

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How Is Cancer Treated?

There are a number of cancer treatments. These include surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy (anticancer drugs). Recently, doctors have also been using biological therapy for some cancers. Some biological therapies block the chain of events in and around cancer cells. For example, biological therapies help the body's own defenses kill cancer cells. Other biological therapies help the body's logical therapies work better than other treatments. Some cancer patients take part in studies of new treatments. These may pay for a second opinion if you ask for one.

Before starting treatment, you may want another doctor to go over the diagnosis and treatment plan. This is called getting a second opinion. Some insurance companies require a second opinion; others may pay for a second opinion if you ask for one. Some cancer patients take part in studies of new treatments. These studies—are called clinical trials—are meant to find out whether new treatments are safe and whether they work or work better than other treatments. If you are a cancer patient and are interested in taking part in a clinical trial, talk with your doctor. You can find out about current clinical trials for cancer from the NCI's Cancer Information Service, see the ‘For More Information’ section.

Can Cancer Be Prevented?

Although your chances of getting cancer go up as you get older, there are things that you can do to prevent it. Experts think that about two-thirds of all cancers may be linked to things we can control, especially use of tobacco and what we eat and drink. Having a lot of contact with some chemicals, metals, or pesticides (weed killers and insect killers) can also make your risk higher. You can lower your risk of cancer in several ways:

- Do not use tobacco products. Tobacco causes cancer. In fact, smoking tobacco, using smokeless tobacco, and passive smoking (often breathing other people’s tobacco smoke) cause a third of all cancer deaths in the United States each year.
- Avoid sunburns. Too much ultraviolet radiation from the sun and from other sources—such as sunlamps and tanning booths—damages your skin and can cause skin cancer.
- Eat right. Have at least five servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Also cut down on fatty foods and eat plenty of fiber.
- Keep your weight down. People who are overweight are more likely to get diseases of the prostate, pancreas, uterus, colon, and ovary. Older women who are overweight are more likely to develop breast cancer.
- Stay active. Studies show that exercise can help lower your chance of getting breast and colon cancer and perhaps other cancers too. The National Institute on Aging has more information on exercise for people age 50 and older, see the “For More Information” section.
- If you drink alcohol, don’t have more than one or two drinks a day. Drinking large amounts of alcohol raises the risk of cancers of the mouth, throat, esophagus, and larynx. People who smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol have an especially high risk of getting these cancers.
- Follow work and safety rules to avoid dangerous contact with materials that cause cancer.

For More Information

The Cancer Information Service (CIS), a program of the National Cancer Institute, can provide accurate, up-to-date information about cancer. Information specialists can answer your questions in English, Spanish, and on TTY equipment. The number is easy to remember: 800-4-CANCER (800-422-6277, tollfree) or 800-332-8615 (TTY/toll-free).

You can get answers to your questions online through the CIS instant messaging service on NCI’s website at www.cancer.gov. Click on “LiveHelp online chat”.

For more information about health and aging, contact: National Institute on Aging Information Center P.O. Box 8057 Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057 800-222-2225 (tollfree) 800-222-4225 (TTY/tollfree) www.nia.nih.gov To order publications (in English or Spanish) or to sign up for regular email alerts, visit www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation. 
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Do not use sunscreen.

How Can Cancer Be Prevented?

Cancer is caused by a combination of genetic factors and environmental exposures. Genetic factors include family history, age, and sex. Environmental factors include smoking, exposure to certain chemicals and metals, and infections.

Cancer can be prevented by avoiding known cancer risks, including smoking, using sunscreen, eating a healthy diet, and getting regular check-ups.

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Visit NIBHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nibhseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults. There are also special features that make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.
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✦ Keep your weight down. People who are overweight are more likely to develop breast cancer.

✦ Stay active. Exercise helps control your weight and lower your risk of developing the disease. It can also help lower your risk of getting breast and colon cancer and perhaps other cancers too. The National Institute on Aging has more information on exercise for people age 50 and older, see the “For More Information” section.

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