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**Colon Cancer Awareness Month 2020 – Key Messages**

*Purpose: A resource that regions can reference when developing copy in any communications about Colon Cancer Awareness Month to the general public. This will help to ensure that Regional Cancer Programs and Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) are aligned on messaging about getting checked for colon cancer.*

* March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month). Cancer Care Ontario is encouraging Ontarians to get checked for colon cancer with the fecal immunochemical test (FIT).
* ColonCancerCheck is Ontario’s population-based, provincial colon cancer screening program.

**Colon cancer screening recommendations**

* ColonCancerCheck recommends that people who have no symptoms and are at **average risk** of colon cancer get checked with FIT every two years.  
  + “Average risk” is defined as people ages 50 to 74 with no first-degree relative (parent, brother, sister or child) who has been diagnosed with colon cancer.
* People with an abnormal FIT result should have a colonoscopy within eight weeks of their abnormal result.
* Someone between the ages of 50 and 74 with no symptoms or family history of colon cancer can also choose to get checked with flexible sigmoidoscopy instead of FIT. If getting checked with flexible sigmoidoscopy, the test should be repeated every 10 years.  
  + ColonCancerCheck recommends that people who have no symptoms and are at **increased risk** of colon cancer get checked with a colonoscopy. Someone at increased risk should start getting checked at age 50, or 10 years earlier than the age their relative was diagnosed with colon cancer, whichever comes first.
    - * “Increased risk” is defined as people with a family history of colon cancer that includes one or more first-degree relatives (parent, brother, sister, or child) who have been diagnosed with this disease.

The ColonCancerCheck program does not recommend checking people younger than age 50, unless they have a first-degree relative (parent, brother, sister or child) who has been diagnosed with colon cancer before the age of 60. Even though the number of colon and rectal cancers being found in younger adults is increasing in Canada, it is still very low in adults younger than age 50.

* Many people don’t realize that colon cancer can happen in anyone over 50, even if no one in their family has had the disease, which makes it important to get checked for colon cancer.
* Often there are no problems or physical symptoms experienced early on in the disease. As colon cancer develops over time, a person may experience the following problems and symptoms: unexplained anemia that is caused by low iron, blood in the stool (poop), diarrhea, constipation or feeling that the bowel does not empty completely.
* If you or your loved one is worried about colon cancer, encourage them to talk to their family doctor or nurse practitioner about their concerns.

**About colon cancer**

* + Colon cancer is cancer of the large bowel (colon), which is the lower part of the digestive system. Rectal cancer is cancer of the last six inches of the colon. Together, they are called “colorectal cancer” (commonly called “colon cancer” or “bowel cancer”).
  + Colon cancer is the second most common cause of cancer death in men and the third most common cause of cancer death in women in Ontario.
  + The risk of getting colon cancer goes up after age 50.
  + Getting checked with FIT helps find colon cancer early, when there are no uncomfortable symptoms (such as persistent diarrhea and stomach pain) and when it is more likely to be cured. Without getting checked, someone could have colon cancer and not know it.
  + When colon cancer is caught early, nine out of 10 people with the disease can be cured. If colon cancer is caught later, it can be treated, but curing it is less likely – only about one out of every 10 people with colon cancer that is caught late will be cured.
  + Men and women ages 50 to 74 should get checked for colon cancer, even if no one in their family has had the disease.

**About FIT**

* In June 2019, Ontario transitioned from the fecal occult blood test (FOBT) to FIT for colon cancer screening.
* It is easy to get checked for colon cancer with FIT. FIT is a free at-home screening test available across the province for eligible Ontarians through ColonCancerCheck, Ontario’s organized colon cancer screening program.
* Getting checked for colon cancer regularly is important because when colon cancer is found early, it is more likely to be cured. Colon cancer screening with FIT may also prevent some colon cancers by finding pre-cancerous polyps (abnormal growths on the lining of the colon or rectum) that could turn into cancer over time.
* FIT is a simple, safe and painless at-home cancer screening test that checks your stool (poop) for tiny amounts of blood, which could be caused by colon cancer or pre-cancerous polyps (abnormal growths on the lining of the colon or rectum that could turn into cancer over time).
* Talk to your family doctor or nurse practitioner about getting checked for colon cancer with FIT.
  + If you do not have a family doctor or nurse practitioner, you can call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-828-9213.
  + If you live in a First Nation community, you can contact your health centre or nursing station.
  + You can also talk about getting checked with FIT with a mobile screening coach staff member if a coach comes to your area ([cancercareontario.ca/en/find-cancer-services/mobile-screening](https://www.cancercareontario.ca/en/find-cancer-services/mobile-screening)). *NOTE – this message is only for regions that have mobile screening coaches.*
* Once a FIT has been ordered for you by your family doctor or nurse practitioner (or through Telehealth Ontario), LifeLabs will mail a FIT package to your Ontario mailing address of choice. You should mail your completed FIT to LifeLabs or drop it off at a LifeLabs Patient Service Centre as soon as possible.
* Cancer Care Ontario will send screening participants their FIT results and will remind them when it is time to repeat screening.

**Causes of colon cancer**

* There are many reasons someone may develop colon cancer – some reasons are better understood than others. However, we know that pre-cancerous polyps (abnormal growths on the lining of the colon or rectum) could turn into cancer over time.
* Often, there are no problems or physical symptoms during the early stages of the disease. As colon cancer develops over time, the following problems and symptoms may occur:
  + Unexplained anemia (drop in red blood cell count) that is caused by a low iron;
  + Blood (either bright red or very dark) in the stool (poop);
  + Unexplained weight loss;
  + New and persistent diarrhea, constipation or feeling that the bowel does not empty completely; and
  + New and persistent stomach discomfort.
* Some habits or personal characteristics, called risk factors, can increase someone’s chance of getting colon cancer. Some risk factors cannot be changed, such as age and family history. However, there are risk factors that can be changed. Here are steps that can be taken to lower the risk of getting colon cancer:
  + Limit alcohol – Men should have no more than two drinks a day and women should have no more than one drink a day. However, no amount of drinking has been found to be safe to prevent an increased risk of colon cancer;
  + Limit red meat and try not to eat processed meat (e.g., bologna, salami);
  + Have a healthy body weight;
  + Be physically active as part of everyday life;
  + Eat a diet high in fibre (including vegetables and fruits);
  + Quit smoking and stop using tobacco products (e.g., cigarettes, chewing tobacco); and
  + Get screened with FIT.

**For more information, please contact:**

**Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) Media Relations**

**Phone:** 1.855.460.2646

**Email:** [media@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:media@cancercare.on.ca)