

Serologic Blood Tests for Colorectal Cancer Screening

Key Messages

1. Cancer Care Ontario cannot recommend the use of serologic blood tests for colorectal cancer screening.
2. Cancer Care Ontario recommends that individuals participate in ColonCancerCheck—Ontario's colorectal cancer screening program.
3. ColonCancerCheck offers screening free of charge through fecal occult blood tests (FOBTs) every two years for eligible individuals at average risk aged 50 to 74 and colonoscopy for eligible individuals with a family history of colorectal cancer. Serologic blood testing is not part of ColonCancerCheck.
4. Cancer Care Ontario is examining the evidence for serologic blood tests as a part of broader clinical practice guidelines for colorectal cancer screening. Cancer Care Ontario will revise its position if the evidence is sufficient to support the use of serologic blood tests.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What are serologic blood tests for colorectal cancer screening?

Serologic tests for colorectal cancer are blood tests that assess someone's risk of currently having colorectal cancer. They are advertised by laboratories and others as an alternative to fecal occult blood tests (FOBTs) but not as an alternative to colonoscopy.

Serologic blood tests for colorectal cancer screening are beginning to come onto the market in Canada. They are generally being promoted by laboratories and distributors as acceptable alternatives for colorectal cancer screening. These tests are not insured by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) and they are available on a user-pay basis.

2. Does Cancer Care Ontario recommend using serologic blood tests to screen people for colorectal cancer?

At this time, Cancer Care Ontario cannot recommend the use of serologic blood tests for colorectal cancer screening. The scientific evidence is insufficient to recommend or endorse their use. Cancer Care Ontario recommends that individuals participate in ColonCancerCheck—Ontario's colorectal cancer screening program. Screening is most effective when offered through an organized, population-based program that uses quality assurance to maximize screening benefits and minimize harms. Serologic blood testing is not currently recommended as a part of this program in Ontario.

Cancer Care Ontario is working with the Program in Evidence-Based Care (PEBC) to examine the evidence for serologic blood tests as a part of broader clinical practice guidelines for colorectal cancer screening. When these guidelines are released, Cancer Care Ontario will review its position on serologic blood tests for colorectal cancer screening.

3. What are the benefits of an organized screening program?

Benefits of an organized program such as ColonCancerCheck—Ontario’s colorectal cancer screening program—include the provision of evidence-based care, quality assurance of the screening test (e.g., the fecal occult blood test or FOBT) and any follow-up tests, tracking of abnormal tests to assist with timely follow-up, results notifications and a recall of participants when they are due for screening. ColonCancerCheck is free of charge to eligible Ontarians. People who are screened with a test outside of ColonCancerCheck will not benefit from being part of an organized screening program.

4. Is Cancer Care Ontario studying whether serological blood tests could be used to screen people for colorectal cancer?

Cancer Care Ontario is working with the Program in Evidence-Based Care (PEBC), a robust and rigorous guideline development program, to develop clinical practice guidelines for colorectal cancer screening. The guidelines will evaluate the evidence for colorectal cancer screening test(s) in the context of an organized, population-based screening program. Serologic blood tests will be included in the evidence review.

5. What do I do with an abnormal serologic test result?

Because the scientific evidence is insufficient to recommend their use, Cancer Care Ontario cannot offer a recommendation on what to do for patients with an abnormal serologic blood test result.

6. What is Cancer Care Ontario’s recommendation for colorectal cancer screening?

ColonCancerCheck, which was launched by Cancer Care Ontario and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, recommends that people aged 50 to 74 years and those with a family history of colorectal cancer be screened regularly for the disease.

Most people aged 50 to 74 are at average risk for colorectal cancer and should be screened once every two years with the fecal occult blood test (FOBT). People who have a first-degree relative (i.e., parent, sibling or child) with a history of colorectal cancer should be screened with colonoscopy beginning at age 50, or 10 years earlier than the age at which their relative was diagnosed, whichever occurs first.

To find out more about the ColonCancerCheck Program, please visit www.cancercare.on.ca/screenforlife.

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