

CANCER MONITORING

Monitoring for Colorectal Cancer Recurrence

Life after colorectal cancer treatment can bring relief, hope, and sometimes uncertainty. Regular follow-up care, also called monitoring, helps your healthcare team watch for signs that cancer may return and supports your long-term health.

What does recurrence mean?

A recurrence means colorectal cancer has come back after treatment. It can happen in the same area as the original cancer or in another part of the body. Monitoring helps find recurrence early, when treatment options may be more effective.

Why monitoring matters

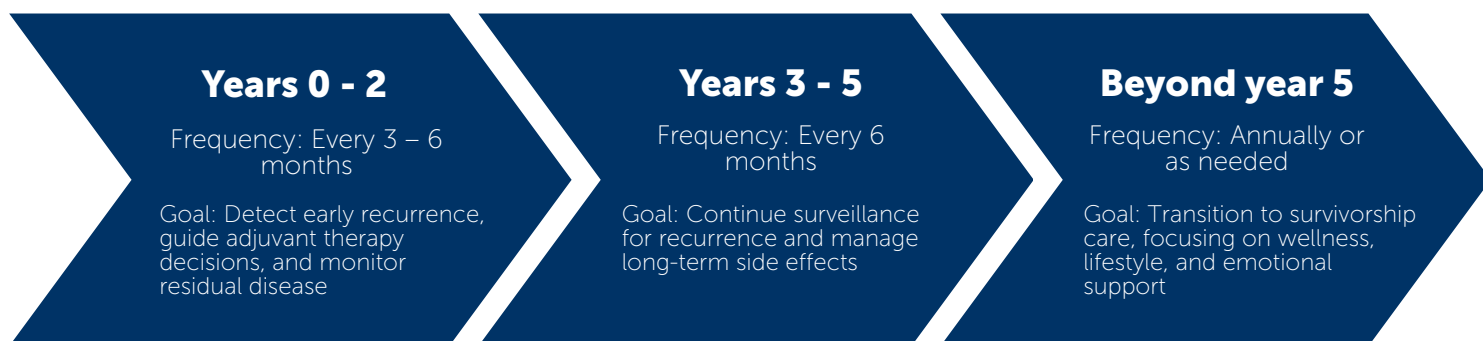
Even when treatment is successful, small cancer cells can sometimes remain in the body. Follow-up care helps your care team detect changes early, manage side effects, and support your overall wellness.

Possible signs or symptoms to report

Contact your healthcare provider if you notice new or ongoing symptoms such as unexplained weight loss, changes in bowel habits, blood in the stool, ongoing abdominal pain, fatigue, or shortness of breath. Many symptoms are not cancer-related, but it is important to check.

Follow-up schedule for colorectal cancer survivors

Recurrence testing typically begins shortly after completion of initial treatment, such as surgery or chemotherapy. The exact schedule is tailored to the patient's cancer stage, treatment response, and overall risk profile.



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Comparison of Cancer Monitoring Methods

Once you have completed your treatment, whether your treatment plan included surgery, chemotherapy, and/or radiation, you and your medical team should discuss your follow-up care plan. The plan will include ongoing monitoring and should also address lifestyle and emotional needs.

Test Type	Purpose / Use Case	Sample Type	Frequency / Timing	Key Advantages	Limitations / Notes
Clinical Surveillance	Symptom review, physical exam	In-person visit	Every 3–6 months (first 2–3 years)	Non-invasive, holistic assessment	May miss asymptomatic recurrence
Colonoscopy	Detect local recurrence or new polyps	Visual exam	Every 1–3 years	Gold standard for local detection	Requires prep and sedation
CEA Blood Test: biomarker testing	Tumor marker monitoring	Blood	Every 3–6 months (first 3 years)	Widely available, low cost	Not reliable for all patients
CT Scan	Detect metastases or local recurrence	Imaging	Every 6–12 months	High-resolution internal imaging	Radiation exposure; may miss small lesions
MRI / PET Scan	Detailed imaging for specific cases	Imaging	As needed	Useful for soft tissue or metabolic data	Higher cost; limited availability
ctDNA Testing (e.g., Signatera)	Detect minimal residual disease (MRD), predict recurrence	Blood	Post-surgery, then every few months	Highly sensitive, sometimes personalized	Not FDA-approved for recurrence; CLIA-certified
CTC Testing (e.g., CellSearch)	Monitor progression, recurrence, treatment response	Blood	Serial testing during remission	Real-time insights; FDA-cleared for mCRC	Less common in early-stage CRC

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Questions for My Care Team

After you have finished treatment, you may have a number of questions swirling in your mind. Here are some questions to consider asking your healthcare team to make sure you are clear on your next steps.

General questions

- What follow-up tests will I need, and how often will I need them?
- Is there a cancer survivorship clinic where I can go for my follow-up care?
- Which doctors will be coordinating my follow-up care?
- If I move or need to switch doctors, how do I continue my recommended follow-up care schedule?
- What is my risk of recurrence?
- What signs and symptoms should I watch for?

Questions about testing

- How can a blood test that measures ctDNA be helpful as a part of my follow-up care?
- How often should I get ctDNA testing?
- How does ctDNA testing compare with CEA testing? And how often should those tests be done?
- What does it mean when ctDNA results are negative?
- What does it mean when ctDNA results are positive? What are the next steps?
- How often do I need a CT scan? Where will it be done?
- How often do I need a colonoscopy? Who will do it and where?
- What type of follow-up care do I need beyond five years after treatment?
- Where can I find more information about follow-up care?

Personalized Follow-up Checklist

Use this checklist to help track your follow-up care. Your healthcare team can help, if needed.

- I know how often I should have follow-up visits with my healthcare provider
- I understand which symptoms I should report right away
- I know when my next colonoscopy is scheduled
- I know if I need regular blood tests (such as CEA)
- I understand if and when I need imaging tests (CT, MRI, or PET scans)
- I keep a list of my medications and supplements
- I bring questions or concerns to each appointment
- I know who to contact between visits if symptoms arise
- I have access to emotional or mental health support if needed
- I understand lifestyle steps that support my long-term health

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