



# Great Lakes VA HEALTHVIEWS

*The Newsletter about Health for Veterans in VISN 12*



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## Preventing Colon Cancer

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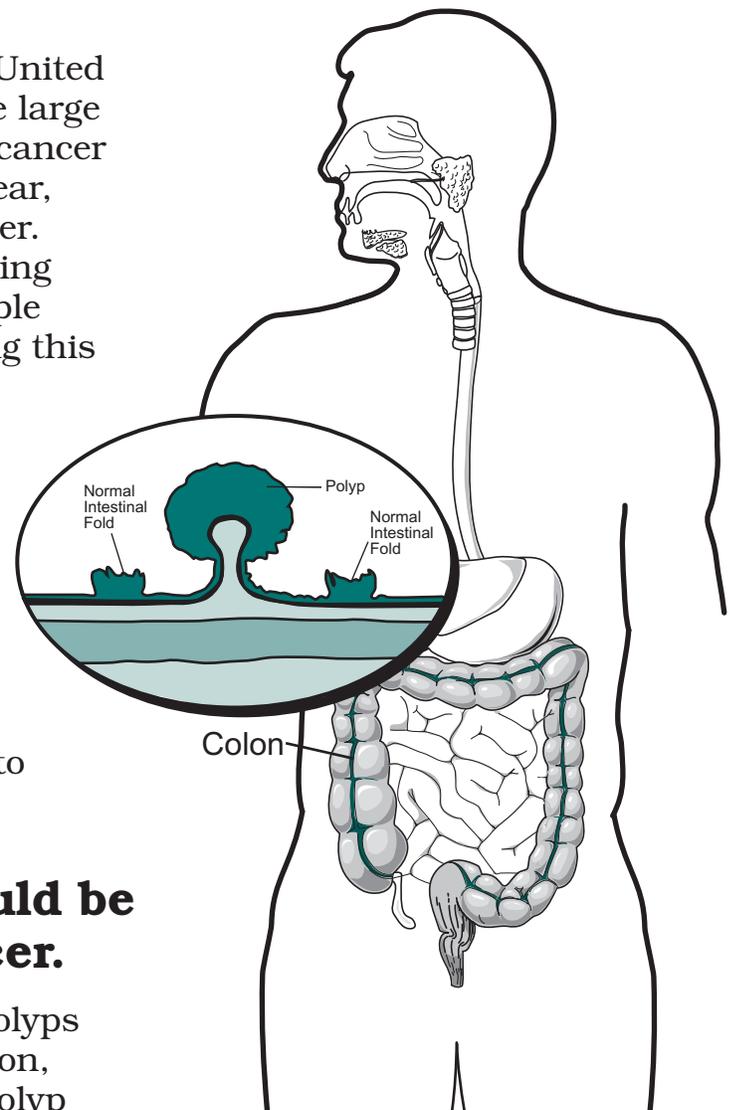
Every year over 140,000 people in the United States are diagnosed with cancer of the large intestine (also called the colon). Colon cancer is also called colorectal cancer. Each year, over 50,000 people will die of this cancer. In fact, colon cancer is the second leading cancer in the United States. But a simple screening test can save you from having this preventable cancer.

### Who is at risk for colon cancer?

Everyone is at risk for colon cancer. Colon cancer spreads slowly. Early cancers may not show any symptoms, so you will not even know you have it. This is why a screening test is needed to catch the cancer very early.

### Everyone over age 50 should be screened for colon cancer.

As you age, you may develop polyps. Polyps are small growths in the wall of the colon, somewhat like moles on your skin. A polyp can take up to 10 years to grow and turn into cancer.



## What tests are used?

An easy test that you can do in your own home is the fecal occult blood test. It is a screening test that requires three samples of your stool (bowel movement). You put a small amount of stool on a card and send the card to a hospital laboratory. The lab checks for small amounts of blood in the stool.

At age 50, a screening flexible sigmoidoscopy should be performed. This 10-minute test lets the doctor look at tissue in the lower part of your colon, where most of the polyps grow.

A more complete test that may be suggested by your doctor is called a colonoscopy. The colonoscope is a flexible tube with a tiny light on the end that lets the doctor see the whole colon. If polyps are found, the polyps can be removed. Before the colonoscopy, you will be given medicine to help you relax. You may need someone to drive you home after the test. If you have questions about this test, ask your doctor or nurse.

## What are the signs of colorectal cancer?

Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any of these warning signs:

- Blood in the stool
- A change in bowel habits
- Change in the shape of your stool

- Cramping pain in your lower stomach
- Feeling discomfort or the urge to have a bowel movement, without being able to have one

## What else can I do to prevent colon cancer?

Follow a healthy life style:

- Eat five servings of fruits and vegetables each day
- Eat high fiber foods found in whole grains, cereals, fruits, and vegetables
- Use high calcium foods like low fat dairy products
- Eat more fish, chicken, turkey, and dried beans as your source of protein
- Eat fewer saturated fats (fatty red meats and high fat foods)
- Keep a healthy weight for your height
- Stop smoking
- Avoid alcohol
- Be active every day

Take good care of your body and decrease the risk of cancer.

Screening for colon cancer saves lives! Get screened.

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Source: Bond, John H. Screening for Colorectal Cancer: Is there Progress for Early Detection. Practical Gastroenterology, 2004; 48-60.

# Cancer and Clinical Trials

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Oncology Program Administrator  
Hines VAH

## What is a clinical trial?

A clinical trial is one of the last stages in the cancer research process. Clinical trials use volunteers to test new treatments for cancer. They try new combinations of therapies, such as drugs, surgery, and radiation. They also test new methods, such as gene therapy.

## Why are clinical trials important?

Clinical trials are important because they help develop new methods of cancer care. There is no guarantee that a treatment being tested will work. New treatments may also have unknown risks. But it may be worth the risk. If the new treatment does work, trial patients will be the first to benefit.

## How can I find out more information?

Ask your cancer care specialist or visit your VA's Patient Education Resource Center/Library. You can also find information on the website of the National Cancer Institute (NCI):

**NCI's main website**

<http://www.nci.nih.gov>

**Comprehensive clinical trial information**

<http://cancertrials.nci.nih.gov>

**Information about cancer treatment, screening, prevention, supportive care and clinical trials**

<http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov>

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Source: "Taking Part in Clinical Trials – What Cancer Patients Need To Know", National Cancer Institute.

## Ask your provider about these recommended cancer screening tests:

- Colorectal cancer stool test every year or flexible sigmoidoscopy every 5 years for everyone over age 50.
- Pap smear every three years. Women who have had normal pap smears may stop at age 65.
- Breast exam and mammography every one to two years for women aged 50-70. Women aged 40-49 should discuss mammography with their health care provider.
- Ask your doctor to check skin lesions (sores) that change appearance or do not heal.

Source: Healthy Living Brochure, Milwaukee VAMC

# Why Should You Get a Yearly Flu Shot?

Mary Wesley, RN  
Nurse Epidemiologist  
Jesse Brown VAMC

More than 36,000 people over 65 die from flu-related problems each year. About 114,000 are admitted to the hospital each year due to the flu. Millions of Americans get the flu when an infected person speaks, coughs, or sneezes. Did you know that if a person with the flu touches his mouth or nose and then shakes your hand, you could get the flu also? A yearly flu shot is the best way to lower your chance of getting the flu.

## Is it a cold or is it the flu?

The flu and a cold are both illnesses that affect your breathing, but they are caused by different viruses. It's often hard to tell the difference between the flu and a cold. Either one can give you a runny or stuffy nose. But the flu is often worse than a cold. Also, fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common with the flu. The flu can cause serious health problems, such as pneumonia or bacterial infections.

## How can I lower my flu risk?

A yearly flu shot is the best way to lower your chance of getting sick with the flu. The best time of year to get your flu shot is October through November. But you can still get a flu shot after November. The flu season usually lasts from November through April.

You should definitely get a flu shot if you:

- Are older than 50
- Live in a nursing home or long-term care center with people who have chronic illnesses
- Have diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, or lung disease

- Have a history of chronic infections, such as bronchitis
- Have a disease (such as cancer) that lowers your body's ability to fight off infections
- Are more than three months pregnant
- Are a healthcare worker
- Live in close quarters with others, like in the military

Some people should not get flu shots. You should not get the flu shot if you:

- Are allergic to eggs
- Are sick or have a fever
- Have had a reaction to the flu shot in the past

## **What should I do after getting a flu shot?**

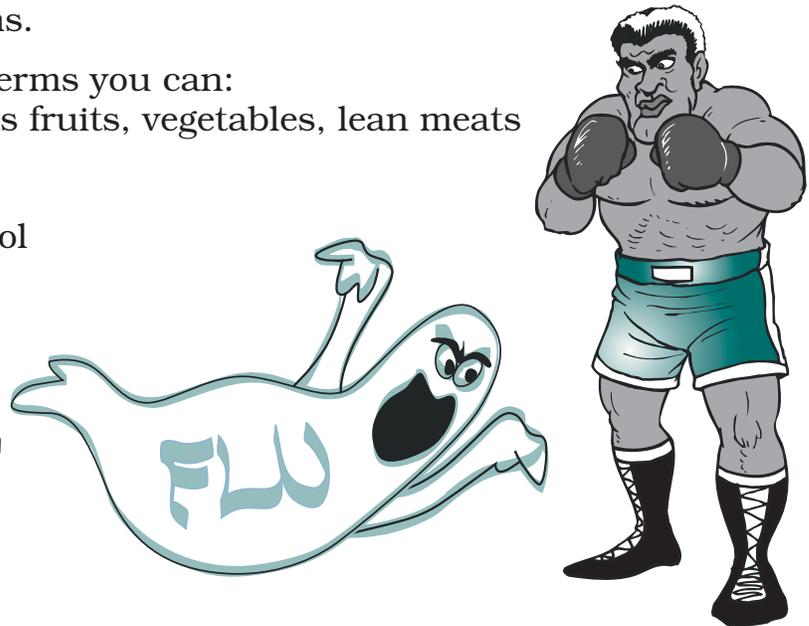
A flu shot lowers your chance of getting the flu during the winter to spring season. After you receive your flu shot, it will take about two weeks before your body can provide you with protection against the flu. During this two-week period, stay away from large crowds or people who have flu-like symptoms. Protection from the flu will last about a year from the time you get your shot.

Hand wash! Hand wash! Hand wash! Washing your hands after you touch your nose or mouth is another way to protect yourself and others from germs.

To help fight off viruses and germs you can:

- Eat healthy food, such as fruits, vegetables, lean meats
- Get plenty of rest
- Avoid tobacco and alcohol

**For the best protection  
against the flu...  
Get a flu shot.**



Source: Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. April 30, 2004; v.53



**Listening  
to Veterans**

## ASK AN EXPERT

***I heard taking Ginkgo pills will help my memory. I was wondering if I could take it along with my other medicine?***

Ginkgo (Ginkgo Biloba) comes from the leaf of the ginkgo tree. It is considered a dietary supplement or herbal medicine. Ginkgo is often used to help memory loss, dizziness, eye pressure and altitude sickness. It is believed to work by helping blood flow to the brain and other areas of the body.

But remember, even so-called “natural” herbal products can have side effects. Taking Ginkgo may give you an upset stomach, headache, dizziness, or diarrhea.

Ginkgo also has an effect on several prescription medicines:

- If you are taking blood thinners (aspirin, Coumadin<sup>®</sup>, etc), Ginkgo can increase your risk of bleeding.
- Ginkgo may cause blood pressure pills to stop working.
- Ginkgo can affect the blood sugar levels of a person with diabetes.
- Certain psychiatric drugs can react with Ginkgo.

You should also be aware that herbal products are not guaranteed to be safe and effective. The FDA regulates supplements as a food, not a drug. This means the laws about putting the supplements on the market are less strict than for prescription medicine.

## **For Example:**

- The manufacturer does not need to do any studies to prove a supplement is safe.
- The manufacturer does not have to prove the supplement really does what they claim.
- Different companies can make the same product and each one has different ingredients.
- Supplements may be contaminated with unwanted substances (like pesticides, heavy metals or prescription drugs).
- A supplement may not actually contain the plant species listed on the label.
- Supplements may not really have the amount of ingredients listed on the label.

There are many herbal products and supplements available in your pharmacy or grocery store. Before taking any of these products, you should:

1. Talk to your health care provider. Even if your provider does not know a lot about a particular supplement, he or she can find the latest research about using it.
2. Ask your pharmacist or a dietitian for help in choosing the right product.
3. Do your homework and choose only a product that you know works. You can find out if there is any scientific research on the supplement you are interested in (see list at end of article).

4. Choose a product from a major company. Products that have the words “standardized or NF” may be better quality.
5. Only buy supplements that have an expiration date, a lot number from the manufacturer and company contact information.

## **For more information:**

### **National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine**

1-888-644-6226

TTY 1-866-464-3615

Web site: [nccam.nih.gov](http://nccam.nih.gov)

### **U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition**

1-888-723-3366

Web site: [www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov)

### **Office of Dietary Supplements**

Web site: [ods.od.nih.gov](http://ods.od.nih.gov)

### **MedlinePlus**

[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/medlineplus.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/medlineplus.html)

*(search under health topics such as alternative medicine or herbals)*

Answered by:

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Source: What's in the bottle? An introduction to dietary supplements. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, July 2004.

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/bottle/index.htm>

Your best source for information on your health will always be your doctor or health care provider. We hope this newsletter will encourage you to talk to your health care provider and ask questions about your health concerns.

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**Main Phone Numbers  
for VISN 12 Hospitals**

Hines:	708-202-VETS (8387)
Iron Mountain:	906-774-3300
Madison:	608-256-1901
Milwaukee:	414-384-2000 or 1-888-469-6614
North Chicago:	1-800-393-0865 or 847-688-1900
Tomah:	1-800-USA-TOMAH 1-800-872-8662 or 608-372-3971
VA Chicago:	312-569-VETS (8387)

**“Ask An Expert” Question  
or Idea for Future Articles**

Do you have an “Ask An Expert” question or an idea for a future article? Your ideas can be e-mailed, mailed, or faxed to the Senior Editor.

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