



Virtual Colonoscopy

(CT Colonography)

Is this the test for you?

Pros:

1. No anesthesia is required. Performed by radiologist at hospital X-ray department. No driver is needed. Quick 30 minute exam. You can return to work later that same morning.
2. Virtual colonoscopy is safe and has been shown to be *nearly* as effective as traditional sedated screening colonoscopy in detecting most colorectal cancers.

Cons:

1. **Not designed to prevent colorectal cancer.** Like the Cologuard stool test and the Shield blood test, virtual colonoscopy effectively detects colorectal cancer only AFTER cancer has already developed. However, it is not as accurate as regular colonoscopy at identifying colon polyps before they turn cancerous. Almost all colorectal cancers start as small, benign polyps, which are quite common. Traditional screening colonoscopy is the only method that allows for the immediate removal of polyps. It has been a highly accurate test for over 50 years, successfully identifying and removing polyps - thus *preventing* colorectal cancer.
2. **Patients undergoing a virtual colonoscopy must still go through the same colonoscopy laxative preparation (or “bowel prep”),** which is widely considered the most unpleasant part of a traditional colonoscopy.
3. **You must still disrobe and put on a patient gown and have a tube inserted a short distance into rectum.** This tube pumps air (or carbon dioxide) into the rectum to inflate the colon, which enhances visibility. Since no sedation is used, this procedure may be somewhat uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing. Sedation during traditional colonoscopy allows you to be pleasantly unaware of the entire process.
4. **A traditional colonoscopy may still be necessary.** You cannot take a biopsy or remove a polyp during a virtual colonoscopy. If virtual colonoscopy detects anything suspicious, if a biopsy is needed, or if a polyp is found, you will need to undergo the full bowel prep all over again and have a traditional colonoscopy with sedation.
5. **It involves exposure to radiation through the CT scan.** The average dose of radiation for a virtual colonoscopy is 8.0 mSv — about the same as 80 chest x-rays (0.1 mSv each). While this amount is not immediately dangerous, the damage from radiation exposure accumulates over time. There is no radiation exposure during a traditional colonoscopy.
6. **Insurance may not cover the cost.** For those over 65, Medicare began covering virtual colonoscopy for routine screening in January 2025, but private and commercial insurance plans may vary in their coverage.
7. **If normal, virtual colonoscopy must be repeated every 5 years.** Current screening guidelines recommend a traditional colonoscopy every 10 years.
8. **Recommended primarily for those individuals who are unable or unwilling to have a traditional sedated colonoscopy.**