

# Doubts About Virtual Colonoscopy

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**(CBS/AP)** The accuracy of virtual colonoscopy, which provides a computer-generated 3-D view of the colon, varies considerably, depending on the training and methods of the doctors performing it, researchers say.

The cancer-detecting procedure is less reliable than previously thought and not ready for widespread use, according to a study of 600 patients at nine major clinics.

In conventional colonoscopy, a long, flexible viewing tube about the thickness of a garden hose is inserted in the rectum and threaded several feet into the colon. A device on the end of the tube is used to remove suspicious growths, which are later tested for cancer.

Virtual colonoscopy is designed to take some of the discomfort out of the examination. A narrower rectal catheter is inserted, and a CT scanner produces images of the colon.

In the latest study, the patients underwent virtual colonoscopy first, then traditional colonoscopy on the same day.

The virtual method detected 55 percent of patients with at least one suspicious polyp at least 10 millimeters in diameter, compared with a 100 percent success rate for traditional colonoscopy. For smaller tumors, at least 6 millimeters in diameter, the results were worse: 39 percent for virtual colonoscopy versus 99 percent for the traditional method.

Eight patients ultimately were diagnosed with cancer; virtual colonoscopy missed the disease in two of them.

As recently as December, [a widely reported study](#) found that virtual colonoscopy was at least as accurate as the conventional variety.

Because virtual colonoscopy is less invasive, the hope is that more people will undergo screening, Dr. Robert Shapiro, a radiologist at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, told **CBS News Medical Correspondent Dr. Emily Senay** in December.

"The patient doesn't have to have any needles; there's no sedation or analgesia involved in the exam," Shapiro said on [The Early Show](#). "When the patient's done, there's no recovery afterwards, so it's a much simpler and probably better tolerated test."

But the authors of the new research said many of the previous studies were largely based on data from a single hospital and did not take real-world conditions into account.

The leader of the research team called the latest findings "a bucket of cold water" thrown on the growing enthusiasm for virtual colonoscopy.

While the technique might be effective "in the hands of experts, it has yet to be proven that this expertise can be taught and disseminated reliably into daily practice," said the research team, led by Dr. Peter Cotton, a gastroenterologist at [Medical University of South Carolina](#).

Nevertheless, Cotton said doctors should not give up on virtual colonoscopy. "I suspect that in five years' time, with better software and training and maybe some more intelligent computing ... this will become a useful technique," he said.

The study appears in Wednesday's [Journal of the American Medical Association](#).

Participating radiologists were required to have performed at least 10 previous virtual colonoscopies. Only one of the centers had substantial previous experience with the procedures and it had the best results, detecting 82 percent of patients with at least one of the smaller polyps. The eight other centers combined had a detection rate of 24 percent.

"The differences between what virtual colonoscopy can do and what it will do if applied in ordinary practice

circumstances are so great that physicians must be cautious," [Dr. David Ransohoff](#) of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill said in a JAMA editorial.

The [American Cancer Society](#) recommends that people over 50 get a conventional colonoscopy every 10 years, calling it the "gold standard" of colon cancer screening. It said that there is not enough evidence to recommend the virtual test for those with average colon cancer risk.

Most insurance companies do not cover virtual colonoscopies. And when the technique does find suspicious growths, standard colonoscopies are required to remove them.

Colon cancer is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States. It accounts for nearly 60,000 deaths each year. The detection and removal of polyps can help prevent cancer from developing.

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