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Gastroenterologist Shortage Is Forecast

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The United States will face a severe shortage of gastroenterologists as the population ages and the demand for [colorectal cancer](#) screening increases, a health care consulting firm has projected.

At current rates of [cancer](#) screening, the United States will need an additional 1,050 gastroenterologists by 2020, according to the study by The Lewin Group. If colorectal cancer screening rates were to increase by 10 percent, the nation would need as many as 1,550 additional gastroenterologists by that time, the firm found. [Colon cancer](#) is the nation's second leading cancer killer. There are currently 10,390 practicing gastroenterologists in the United States, according to the report.

The projections were reviewed by outside experts and commissioned by Olympus Corporation of the Americas, which manufactures cameras used to screen for colorectal cancer.

Already several studies have documented a looming shortage of primary care physicians and geriatricians needed to treat the aging population. But fixing those shortages still may not improve colorectal cancer detection and treatment.

Primary care physicians do not provide specialized services like [colonoscopies](#) that can detect precancerous [colorectal polyps](#), noted Dr. David A. Johnson, chief of gastroenterology at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, Va., and a past president of the American College of Gastroenterology.

“We know that one of the most cost-effective, preventive things we can do is colorectal cancer screening,” he said. “The more patients age, the more likely they are to have cancer and precancerous disease.”

Current recommendations call for people who are at average risk of colorectal cancer to be screened beginning at age 50. But according to a 2006 survey by the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), only 60 percent of people ages 50 and older said they had been screened in accordance with the guidelines, the report noted. Other screening estimates are still lower, particularly for minorities.

“The shortfall of gastroenterologists could limit the nation’s ability to implement national guidelines for [cancer] screening, particularly in underserved communities,” said Tim Dall, vice president at The Lewin Group and author of the study.

