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**Biomarkers for detecting colorectal cancer non-invasively: DNA, RNA or proteins?**

Loktionov A. CRC biomarkers

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**Abstract**

Colorectal cancer (CRC) is a global problem affecting millions of people worldwide. This disease is unique because of its slow progress that makes it preventable and often curable. CRC symptoms usually emerge only at advanced stages of the disease, consequently its early detection can be achieved only through active population screening, which markedly reduces mortality from this cancer. CRC screening tests that employ non-invasively detectable biomarkers are currently being actively developed and, in most cases, samples of either stool or blood are used. However, alternative biological substances that can be collected non-invasively (colorectal mucus, urine, saliva, exhaled air) now emerge as new sources of diagnostic biomarkers. The main categories of currently explored CRC biomarkers are: (1) proteins (comprising widely used haemoglobin); (2) DNA (including mutations and methylation markers); (3) RNA (in particular microRNAs); (4) low molecular weight metabolites (comprising volatile organic compounds) detectable by metabolomic techniques; and (5) shifts in gut microbiome composition. Numerous tests for early CRC detection employing such non-invasive biomarkers were proposed and clinically studied. While some of these studies generated promising early results, very few of the proposed tests have been transformed into clinically validated diagnostic/screening techniques. Such DNA-based tests as Food and Drug Administration-approved multitarget stool test (marketed as Cologuard®) or blood test for methylated septin9 (marketed as Epi proColon® 2.0 CE) show good diagnostic performance but remain too expensive and technically complex to become effective CRC screening tools. It can be concluded that, despite its deficiencies, protein (haemoglobin) detection-based faecal immunochemical test (FIT) today presents the most cost-effective option for non-invasive CRC screening. The combination of non-invasive FIT and confirmatory invasive colonoscopy is the current strategy of choice for CRC screening. However, continuing intense research in the area promises the emergence of new superior non-invasive CRC screening tests that will allow for developing improved disease prevention strategies.

**Key words:** Colorectal cancer screening; Biomarkers; Non-invasive testing; Stool; Colorectal mucus; Blood

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**Core tip:** Numerous biomarkers detectable in non-invasively collected samples of stool, colorectal mucus, blood, urine, saliva and exhaled air are investigated to develop new tests for colorectal cancer (CRC) early detection and screening. Promising results are often reported, but it is difficult to achieve the right balance between technical complexity, cost and diagnostic performance of the new tests. Today the combination of non-invasive faecal immunochemical test and confirmatory invasive colonoscopy remains CRC screening strategy of choice. However, on-going intense research promises the emergence of new superior non-invasive screening tests that will allow for developing improved prevention strategies for these malignancies.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Colorectal cancer (CRC) is currently the third most frequently diagnosed cancer worldwide. Global incidence for 2018 is estimated at 1801000 new cases, and the number of CRC-related deaths for this period is 861700[1]. Although the highest CRC incidence continues to be observed in economically developed Western countries, it is now rapidly increasing in other parts of the world[2]. Sporadic CRC development can take decades and is in most cases characterised by a slow progression from aberrant crypt formation in the colonic mucosa to benign polyps that may give rise to early cancer, then gradually evolving to invasive and metastasising advanced neoplasms (Figure 1)[2-4]. These pathogenetic features make CRC one of the most preventable and often curable malignancies. However, disease curability entirely depends on its early detection, which is not straightforward since clinical symptoms usually emerge only when CRC is already advanced. The latter factor warrants the necessity of active population screening for CRC, and it is well proven that screening saves lives[2].

Full colonoscopy is regarded as the gold standard diagnostic technique for colorectal tumour detection[5], and it has become a very popular method for primary CRC screening[6-8] in the United States. One apparent reason for this trend is that diagnostic colonoscopy is usually combined with the simultaneous removal of detected polyps and functions as both diagnostic and preventive procedure clearly reducing mortality from CRC[9]. Nonetheless, colonoscopy is an expensive and invasive technique that requires unpleasant bowel preparation and occasionally causes serious complications[10]. Moreover, its sensitivity is not perfect, with polyps sometimes missed[11], the latter problem often depending on operator’s skills[12]. Although colonoscopy position as the final (confirmatory) diagnostic step is undisputable, its use in primary CRC screening remains questionable as indiscriminate application of this method inevitably results in frequent negative outcomes and a large health economic burden[13]. In theory, global introduction of non-invasive tests employing biomarker analysis to select patients that really require endoscopy could dramatically reduce numbers of unnecessary colonoscopies. Unfortunately, none of the existing non-invasive tests successfully combines high diagnostic sensitivity and specificity with technical simplicity and low cost, the key characteristics of an ideal screening modality. This paper provides a brief overview of the current state of the area encompassing biomarker-based non-invasive tests for CRC detection.

**SOURCES OF MATERIAL FOR NON-INVASIVE CRC BIOMARKER TESTING**

CRC development is an extraordinarily complex process driven by multiple genetic, epigenetic, metabolic and immune alterations at the host level and influenced by numerous environmental factors[4,14,15]. Despite intense research, precise mechanisms of CRC development remain largely obscure[4,14,15]. Genome-targeting investigations, especially genome-wide association studies, have revealed a highly complex pathogenetic landscape comprising multiple alternative cascades of molecular events that may eventually result in cancer[4,16]. This complexity leads some investigators to a hardly satisfactory conclusion that “each patient’s CRC is genetically and epigenetically unique”[4]. Nevertheless, colorectal tumours frequently have common molecular patterns that are diagnostically relevant and will be considered below.

The series of morphological events accompanying CRC development is presented in Figure 1. This sequence involves numerous associations with various types of biomolecules that can be characterised as biomarkers. The ideal biomarkers for CRC can be defined as substances that satisfy the following criteria: “(1) are measured easily and inexpensively to identify a patient’s cancer; (2) identify a patient’s prognosis to improve treatment outcome; and (3) predict a patient’s response to a specific treatment”[15]. This paper is focused only on the (1) category, *i.e.*, diagnostic biomarkers of CRC that can be sampled and tested non-invasively.

Figure 1 outlines the main sources of CRC biomarkers in relation to disease stages. From the morphological point of view, it is obvious that (1) colon tissue; (2) gut lumen; (3) blood/lymph circulation are the main sources of CRC-associated DNA, RNA and protein/polypeptide biomarkers associated with the host; (4) Moreover, specific pattern shifts in small metabolite molecules derived from CRC-affected metabolic pathways constitute an additional group of post-metabolic markers that can be analysed by techniques of metabolomics[17,18]; Finally, and (5) CRC-associated gut microbiome changes[19] deserve to be considered as a separate category of diagnostic markers of non-human origin.

***Normal and neoplastic colon tissue***

Colonic epithelium is the site of neoplastic growth initiation. After that CRC progresses within the colonic wall until advanced stages of the disease, hence pre-malignant and malignant colon tissues are certainly the richest biomarker sources[4]. However, invasive biopsies are required for sampling tissue. Therefore, CRC markers detectable in tissue samples are not discussed here.

***Gut lumen***

Colonic epithelium is the key element of the gastrointestinal barrier between host tissues and microbiota-rich colon contents. Until recently it was presumed that all host cells exfoliated or migrating from the surface of the colonic epithelium are immediately incorporated in the faecal matter. According to this simplistic notion, it seemed to be logical that analysing naturally excreted stool samples constitutes the only perfectly non-invasive approach to investigating CRC biomarkers. It should, however, be stressed that stool is a complex mixture of microbiota-dominated faecal matter and occasional fragments of colorectal mucus secreted by goblet cells of the colonic epithelium. While the prevailing faecal component of stool entirely belongs to the environment, colorectal mucus is host-derived. The two-layered structure and functional significance of the mucus overlaying colonic epithelium have been elucidated only during the last decade[20,21], and it is now clear that colorectal mucus rather than faecal matter is the main receptacle of all cells and biomolecules released from either normal or malignant epithelium[22,23]. Intrarectal collection of colorectal mucus had demonstrated high informativeness of this substance[22,23], which was shown to accept CRC-generated malignant colonocytes exfoliated from tumour surface and transport them distally alongside stool flow without incorporating into faeces (Figure 1)[20,23]. Biomarker-rich colorectal mucus essentially serves a border between well oxygenated colonic epithelium and anaerobic gut lumen. Our group has recently developed a simple technique for non-invasive sampling of this mucus[24-26], analysis of which may constitute a very convenient alternative to stool-based tests.

***Blood/lymph circulation***

Blood-derived biomarker analysis is another area of significant interest in the context of CRC detection since blood collection is regarded as a practically non-invasive procedure. It is evident that a wide range of CRC-associated biomarkers can be detected in the circulating blood and lymph of patients with these malignancies, but lymph collection cannot be done with minimal invasiveness. For this reason, only biomarkers measurable in blood will be discussed below. In the modern literature the term “liquid biopsy” is often applied to this group of biomarker-based techniques[27]. Nevertheless, despite easiness of blood sampling and the availability of numerous analytical techniques for biomarker detection in human plasma or serum, the presence of cancer biomarkers in blood may or may not be associated with CRC. Malignancies of other sites should always be excluded if this approach is considered for CRC screening.

***Post-metabolic biomarkers***

The use of metabolomics for revealing CRC-specific changes in patterns of low molecular weight metabolites has recently become another area of active exploration[28]. This new approach can potentially employ a wider range of biological samples comprising blood, stool, colorectal mucus, urine, saliva and exhaled breath, thus bringing about additional diagnostic options.

***Gut microbiome changes associated with CRC***

Recent research has revealed that specific changes in gut microbiome composition may be associated with the development of CRC[19]. In this context stool samples are usually investigated quantitatively for the presence of particular types of bacteria.

The limited choice of sample sources for non-invasive testing creates obvious problems. Collecting gut-derived samples looks preferable, but stool samples, albeit containing cells and molecules originating from the colonic mucosa (*i.e.*, colorectal mucus fragments), are usually dominated by the presence of abundant microbiota-rich faecal matter that often interferes with analytical procedures employed for host-related biomarker detection. Recently described analysis of non-invasively collected colorectal mucus presents a very interesting alternative, however this approach is new and requires further testing. On the other hand, blood collection is very straightforward and easy to standardise, but molecular changes detectable in blood (or plasma/serum) samples are not necessarily gut-specific. Finally, though the use of easily collectable materials (urine, saliva or exhaled air) is extremely attractive, CRC-specific biomarker presence in such samples remains to be adequately explored. The sources of biological material characterised above may contain several types of diagnostic biomarkers that are discussed in the next section.

**BIOMARKERS ASSOCIATED WITH CRC DEVELOPMENT**

The story of non-invasively detectable CRC markers started from 1967 publication by Greegor, describing his observation of frequent occult blood presence in stool samples collected from patients with CRC[29]. That important discovery resulted in the development and prolonged use of haemoglobin-recognising faecal occult blood test (FOBT) as the only non-invasive test for CRC detection. The situation had considerably changed in 1992, when publication by Sidransky *et al*[30] described K-ras gene mutation detection in stool samples obtained from CRC patients and shifted the focus of attention to molecular markers. The area of CRC biomarker research was exponentially expanding since with thousands of papers published, but many initially promising findings failed to transform into clinically relevant diagnostic approaches. The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline the present status of the area of non-invasive biomarkers proposed for detecting asymptomatic CRC. Only the most impressive and clinically relevant observations related to the main groups of these biomarkers (proteins/polypetides, DNA, RNA, small metabolites, microbiome changes) are highlighted in the text below. However, numerous other markers that demonstrated promise in the context of CRC detection are presented in comprehensive Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. As it was impossible to cover all relevant studies, restrictions had to be applied when the Tables were prepared. Publications describing very small studies or reporting negative results were omitted. Likewise, only papers related to CRC, but not adenoma detection, were included since in most cases diagnostic sensitivity of biomarker tests for adenomatous polyps correlates with that for CRC. In addition, the necessity of non-invasive detection of colorectal polyps is still a debatable question, as the proportion of adenomas likely to progress to malignisation is relatively small, whereas the vast majority of these lesions (especially small polyps) never give rise to CRC[134,135].

***Protein markers***

Protein biomarkers considered for CRC early detection and screening are listed in Table 1. Historically, the use of haemoglobin detection in stool for non-invasive CRC detection can be regarded as the most popular approach in terms of population screening. Indeed, the traditional guaiac FOBT was almost exclusively employed for this purpose for several decades, being attractive owing to its simplicity and low cost. Although this test has insufficient sensitivity, it can be credited for saving many human lives[2,136,137]. Nevertheless, the outdated FOBT is now being replaced by faecal immunochemical test (FIT) characterised by a much higher sensitivity. In a recent comprehensive review on FIT, Gies *et al*[31] discussed numerous studies of varying sizes and reported sensitivities between 66% and 74% at specificity levels between 84% and 95% when numbers of analysed CRC cases and controls were over 50. Table 1 also shows that M2-pyruvate kinase (M2-PK) is a relatively well-studied stool marker of CRC[32,33], however FIT performs better and remains considerably more popular. Other stool tests, including metalloproteinase 9 (MMP9)[34] and multimarker protein panels (see Table 1) have been investigated, but these tests have not been clinically accepted so far. It is also intriguing that in a recent small study our group has compared 24 protein biomarkers in non-invasively collected samples of colorectal mucus and concluded that haemoglobin, tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinase 1, M2-PK, peptidyl arginine deiminase 1, C-reactive protein and MMP9 could reliably detect CRC[138].

Blood (or plasma/serum) testing for CRC-associated proteins was employed by many research groups (Table 1), but most of those studies produced relatively modest results. Among single protein markers detectable in the serum only CA11-19 marker protein[36], cysteine-rich 61 protein of the CCN family (Cyr 61)[38], B6-integrin[39] and trefoil factor 3 (TFF3)[36] can be regarded as promising. A number of protein panels were examined as well, however analysing multiple proteins is usually more technically complex and expensive. Impressive test sensitivity and specificity values (98.7% and 94.8% respectively) were reported for combined testing for lectins DC-SIGN and DC-SIGNR by Jiang *et al*[42] in 2014, but these results remain to be confirmed in larger studies. Although blood collection is simple and easy to standardise, protein biomarkers of CRC present in stool or colorectal mucus currently look more diagnostically reliable than those detectable in blood.

An additional advantage of using protein biomarkers for CRC detection is defined by the fact that their immunochemical detection can be easily presented as point of care (POC) tests, which are already available for FIT[139].

***DNA and mRNA markers***

This sub-section briefly discusses studies on CRC detection using DNA and mRNA markers that are listed in Table 2.

Gene mutations, especially those of *K-Ras* and *APC* genes, were the first CRC-associated genetic markers assessed with the purpose of developing new non-invasive modalities for CRC early detection and screening. Regrettably, it soon became clear that using gene mutations alone does not allow achieving satisfactory levels of diagnostic sensitivity. One demonstrative study evaluating this approach in a representative colonoscopy screening group had to conclude that the sensitivity of a panel comprising 21 DNA alterations (point mutations in *K-ras*, *APC* and *p53* genes, microsatellite instability marker BAT-26 deletions and long DNA assay) was only slightly above 50%[46].

Relatively disappointing diagnostic performance of mutation-based assays stimulated the search for CRC-related epigenetic changes, in particular aberrant hypermethylation of CpG islands usually located in gene promoter regions[140]. Gene-specific DNA methylation in stool was extensively investigated (Table 2), and several genes, including *BMP3*, *NDGR4*, *septin 9* (*SEPT9*), *SFRP2, SPG20, TFPI2* and *vimentin* (*VIM*) were shown to have diagnostic sensitivities between 50% and 92% at specificities between 80% and 100% for CRC detection (see recent reviews by Liu *et al*[49], Lam *et al*[50] and Rasmussen *et al*[51]). However, the reproducibility of these results was often problematic, and attempts to combine multiple methylated genes in panels were undertaken to increase assay reliability. It is remarkable that high CRC detection sensitivity and specificity values could be achieved by combining methylation testing for *BMP3* and *NDRG4*[49] or *VIM* and *SFRP2*[53] genes, but these results need to be corroborated. ColosureTM test detecting methylated *VIM* in stool was the first methylation-based commercial test for CRC[141]. This diagnostic product was marketed in the USA but has recently been replaced by a more efficient multimarker Cologuard® test considered later in this sub-section.

Table 2 demonstrates that in the context of CRC diagnostics DNA methylation markers detectable in blood attract at least as much attention as similar markers in stool. Although investigations of different groups often produce conflicting results, it is now apparent that *SEPT9* methylation detection is the best studied option amongst these blood tests[57]. This test has recently been commercialised and regulated for clinical application as Epi proColon® 2.0 CE[142], but its use appears to be limited to opportunistic CRC screening[57]. Moreover, DNA methylation analysis in biological samples is relatively laborious (especially for multimarker panels) and difficult to present in POC format. These factors limit diagnostic potential of this approach. In addition, Table 2 shows that samples of stool, blood, bowel lavage fluid and colorectal mucus were also tested for total and ALU-based DNA quantification, DNA integrity assessment, examination of gene expression and long non-coding RNA expression. However, none of these assays could provide sufficiently high values for diagnostic sensitivity and specificity.

It is now becoming clear that tests involving DNA markers tend to perform better only when markers of different types are combined. Long-term research projects led by a United States company, Exact Sciences, allowed designing a multitarget stool test that demonstrated high levels of sensitivity and specificity for CRC detection. An early version of this test that included *K-ras* mutation, methylation of *VIM, BMP3,* *NDRG4* and *TFPI2* genes, DNA measurement by *β-actin* amount assessment and HemoQuant test for haemoglobin achieved diagnostic sensitivity between 78% and 85% at specificity between 85% and 90% in a case-control study[47]. It is remarkable that this test performed significantly better when directly compared with the test for methylated *SEPT9* in plasma (similar to Epi proColon)[143]. The multitarget test was then simplified, and its final version includes only determination of *K-ras* mutation, *BMP3* and *NDRG4* promoter methylation, DNA measurement by *β-actin* amount assessment and FIT. Screening application of this test in a large study produced CRC detection sensitivity of 92.3% at specificity of 86.6%[48], which makes this assay the best among all available tests involving DNA markers. The test has been approved by United States Food and Drug Administration in 2014 and is now marketed as Cologuard®. However, this test, which can be regarded as an enhanced version of FIT, requires stool collection, remains technically complex, with a multistep analytical procedure required[144], and is very expensive at over $600.

***MicroRNA markers***

MicroRNAs (a sub-class of small non-coding RNA molecules) were discovered and characterised during the last decade of the XX century. Since that time, it was established that microRNAs are important regulators of gene expression intimately involved in the pathogenesis of many diseases including cancer[145]. As many of them are associated with the presence of colorectal tumours, it was suggested that microRNA determination in stool or blood samples may provide a new diagnostic modality for CRC early detection and screening[73]. MicroRNA variants investigated as potential CRC markers are listed in Table 3. Several published studies that used stool sample analysis highlight miR-21 as the best-studied marker of this type, but do not show outstanding sensitivity and specificity values[73]. MiR-451 and miR-223 detectable in stool produced high sensitivity and specificity values in a small study[75], however these markers looked less impressive in other studies, when combined with other microRNAs[73,76]. It is impossible to exclude that these discrepancies may be associated with either technical problems or different ethnic composition of the studied patient groups since clinical studies providing material for microRNA analyses were performed mostly in East Asia.

Table 3 also indicates that microRNA markers of CRC were intensely investigated in blood. Hitherto most of these studies produced modest or inconsistent results. Again, miR-21 was assessed by many groups, and conflicting results were published. Although very high diagnostic sensitivity (96.6%) and specificity (97.8%) values were reported by Ng *et al*[80] for miR-139-3p, which was shown to be downregulated in the serum of CRC patients, this finding remains to be confirmed. Combinations of microRNA markers detectable in plasma or serum were also tested as diagnostic panels. Among these panels (Table 3) combinations of downregulated miR-144-3p, miR-425-5p and miR-1260b[88] and upregulated miR-19a, miR-19b, miR-15b, miR-29a, miR-335 and miR-18a[90] demonstrated sensitivity and specificity levels exceeding 90%.

In addition, it should be noted that a recent small study has revealed that quantification of miR-21 in saliva samples resulted in CRC detection with 97% sensitivity and 91% specificity[93]. These highly intriguing results, however, remain to be corroborated.

Although microRNAs constitute a group of promising CRC biomarkers, further research in this relatively new area is needed for establishing clinically valid diagnostic techniques using these markers. Relative technical complexity of laboratory procedures used in microRNA analysis (RNA extraction, reverse transcription and qPCR analysis) and the necessity of careful assay optimisation and standardisation[146] should also be taken into account when diagnostic potential of this interesting approach is considered.

***Volatile organic compounds (VOC) and small metabolite biomarkers***

Metabolomics is a new discipline that focuses on evaluating a wide variety of endogenous metabolites produced by the organism[17,18,28]. These metabolites can serve as late stage biomarkers of either normal physiological or pathophysiological events, and cancer metabolome is defined as the entire suite of low molecular weight (< 1500 Da) cancer-specific metabolites[17]. Interestingly, some of these metabolites are VOC-s that are present in the gas phase of various excreted biological materials and can potentially be used for detecting malignancies including CRC[99]. Outcomes of metabolomic studies on CRC detection are summarised in Table 4. Remarkably, very impressive results (with CRC detection sensitivity reaching 97% at 99% specificity) were achieved by Sonoda *et al*[97], when dog scent judgment was applied to faeces and exhaled breath samples for discriminating between CRC patients and controls. Unfortunately, it is not realistic to expect that this natural phenomenon could constitute a reliable diagnostic tool. Hence, advanced Electronic Nose technologies are being developed and tested for CRC detection (Table 4) alongside widely used combinations of gas chromatography (GC) and mass spectrometry (MS)[18,94,99]. The latter approach, albeit regarded as the technical gold standard, is complex, costly and unsuitable for population screening. This point is especially important because most of the numerous studies applying metabolomic approaches to detecting CRC-related metabolites (non-VOC-s) in biological substances use various versions of MS (Table 4). Although some of the studies listed in Table 4 produced sensitivity and specificity values above 90% for CRC detection[102,109,113,116,125], cost and complexity issues remain major obstacles for the introduction of these assays into routine clinical practice. In this context the use of electronic noses sensing CRC-associated VOC-s appears to be more promising, especially in view of CRC detection sensitivity and specificity both reaching 95% in a recent study by Zonta *et al*[98].

***Markers of CRC-associated changes of gut microbiome***

The structure of the gastrointestinal tract engenders permanent interactions between its epithelial tissue and luminal microbiota, thus significant microbial impact in colorectal carcinogenesis appears to be likelier than in any other neoplasia. Steadily accumulating evidence indicates a pivotal role for the gut microbiome in influencing the development of CRC[19]. It is now believed that bacterial effects predisposing to CRC include impacts in gut surface barrier disruption, induction of colonic inflammation, direct genotoxic action against epithelial cells and dysbiosis leading to CRC-promoting shifts in gut microflora composition and colonic microenvironment[19,147]. These advances prompted interest in evaluating gut microbiome shifts as possible diagnostic markers for CRC[148]. Results of several recent studies presented in Table 5 show that alterations in gut microbiome composition can potentially serve as non-invasive diagnostic markers for this disease. One remarkable common feature of all studies listed in Table 5 is the obligatory presence of *Fusobacterium nucleatum* (*F. nucleatum*) as one of the components of all tested panels. Indeed, *F. nucleatum*, an anaerobic oral commensal, is now identified as a pathogenetic factor contributing to multiple disorders comprising among others inflammatory bowel disease and CRC[19,148,149]. This interesting diagnostic approach is being actively investigated; however further studies are necessary for firmly establishing gut microbiome place in non-invasive CRC detection.

**NON-INVASIVE BIOMARKER TESTING USE IN CRC SCREENING TODAY AND FUTURE CHALLENGES**

The existing plethora of potential non-invasive approaches to CRC detection briefly reviewed in this paper looks impressive in terms of numbers, but often disappointing in terms of outcome. Most of the published results clearly fail to transform into diagnostic or screening tests that would be highly sensitive and specific, simple to perform and not associated with excessive cost. As a matter of fact, the choice of available biomarker-based tests practically used for CRC screening remains strictly limited. Today FIT is by far the most popular option[2,9,31] owing to its relative simplicity and affordability. Recently introduced and widely advertised multitarget Cologuard® stool test or Epi proColon test targeting *SEPT9* methylation in plasma, albeit approved for clinical use, are technically complex and prohibitively expensive. Comparative studies addressing health economics of CRC screening have demonstrated that the multitarget stool test, being more cost-effective that no screening, is significantly less cost-effective when compared to FIT or invasive endoscopic testing[150-152]. Likewise, methylated SEPT9 detection in plasma samples[153] is clearly less cost-effective than FIT. Considering a unit cost of $8 for FIT (sampling kit and analysis only), Lansdorp-Vogelaar *et al*[154] concluded that a biomarker-based test that detects CRC with higher levels of sensitivity and specificity (up to 100%) should never be more expensive than $57 to be cost-effective. These estimates seem to indicate that in practical terms FIT is currently the most cost-effective test for non-invasive CRC screening. Other authors argue that a highly specific non-invasive biomarker with an improved sensitivity for advanced adenomas (that progress to CRC) would probably be cost-effective at higher threshold costs[155], but the $600 price tag currently attached to Cologuard® is obviously excessive.

In any case, it is apparent that FIT is not a perfect screening test. Its specificity reaching 95% is sufficiently high to be deemed satisfactory, but the sensitivity of this test remains relatively modest[31]. There is, however, an opinion that repeated FIT testing with one-year intervals may compensate for the lack of sensitivity[12]. Moreover, accurate identification of individuals with different levels of CRC risk could lead to creating objective approaches to risk stratification and personalised screening[12,155,156].

The effectiveness of a screening strategy is defined not only by screening test performance characteristics, but also by screening participant adherence[12]. One additional practical problem in CRC screening programmes employing faecal tests is insufficient screening uptake[157,158] that often results from participants’ reluctance to collect stool samples[159,160]. The use of non-invasively collected colorectal mucus samples[24,138] in FIT-like tests can help solving this problem, but this new approach remains to be thoroughly evaluated, and this will require large comparative randomised trials that usually take several years to complete[155]. The existing combination of FIT and confirmatory colonoscopy is the strategy of choice today, and its further optimisation is currently regarded as the main factor in improving CRC screening effectiveness.

The present strong position of FIT as the test of choice for non-invasive CRC screening will certainly be temporary as this test has one intrinsic deficiency that is impossible to eliminate. FIT detects blood, which is shed but not produced by tumours, and bleeding may not be the case in some CRC patients. For this reason, FIT sensitivity will never approach 100%, and it is likely that this target will become achievable only when a screening test employing CRC-specific biomarker(s) is developed. As no single biomarker detectable in all colorectal tumours has been identified so far, multitarget strategies combining either multiple markers of the same type or different assays (such as Cologuard®) emerge as CRC screening options advocated by some experts. However, these complex assays usually require sophisticated laboratory equipment and are laborious and expensive. Although future technological advances can help in eliminating these deficiencies, the search for more reliable and easily detectable single CRC biomarkers should continue.

It can be expected that rapid progress in cancer biomarker research accompanied by accelerated development of new non-invasive tests promises forthcoming breakthroughs in CRC screening and prevention of this disease.

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**Figure 1 Colorectal cancer pathogenesis and sources of potential diagnostic biomarkers at different stages of colorectal cancer development.** CRC: Colorectal cancer.

**Table 1 Non-invasive protein (including cytokine) biomarkers used for colorectal cancer detection**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Study setting** | **Sample type** | **Marker type** | **Biomarker(s)** | **Sensitivity (or its range)** | **Specificity (or its range)** | **Ref.** |
| Screening (reviewed) | Stool | Protein | Haemoglobin (FIT) | 66.0%-74.0% | 84.0%-95.0% | [31] |
| Case-control (reviewed) | Stool | Protein | M2-PK | 68.0%-93.0% | 70.0%-97.5% | [32,33] |
| Case-control | Stool | Protein | MMP 9 | 89.30% | 91.20% | [34] |
| Case-control | Stool | Protein panel | Complement C3, Lactotransferrin, Haemoglobin sunubit α1 and Haptoglopbin | 71.00% | 95.00% | [35] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | CA11-19 | 98.00% | 84.00% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein (cytokine) | MIC-1 (GDF15) | 43.80% | 96.70% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein (cytokine) | IL-6 | 28.0%-89.5% | 46.0%-94.0% | [37] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein (cytokine) | IL-8 | 70.00% | 91.00% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein (cytokine) | Growth-related gene product β1 | 56.10% | 95.30% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | Cyr61 | 83.00% | 97.00% | [38] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | Β6-integrin | 69.80% | 100.00% | [39] |
| Case-control (reviewed) | Serum | Protein | TIMP-1 | 52.0%-85.0% | 60.0%-95.0% | [40] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | RBP4 | 74.90% | 81.70% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | THBS2 | 64.90% | 87.10% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | TFF3 | 74.20% | 94.80% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | COL3A1 | 98.80% | 69.10% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | COL10A1 | 63.00% | 85.00% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | AZGP1 | 55.80% | 85.00% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | Angiopoetin-2 | 79.30% | 82.40% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein | Kininogen | 63.60% | 65.90% | [36] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Protein | Melanotransferrin | 48.20% | 92.50% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein panel | RBP4 and CEA | 80.80% | 91.20% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein panel | TFF3 and CEA | 89.40% | 87.80% | [41] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein panel | sDC-SIGN and sDC-SIGNR | 98.70% | 94.80% | [42] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein panel | IGFBP-3 and CEA | 75.00% | 90.00% | [43] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein panel | AZGP1, CEA and CA19-9 | 67.50% | 82.50% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Protein panel | IGFBP2, DKK3 and PKM2 | 73.00% | 95.00% | [36] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Protein panel | BAG4, IL6ST, VWF, EGFR and CD44 | 73.00% | 90.00% | [44] |
| Case-control, prospective | Serum | Protein panel | CEA, hs-CRP, CYFra21-1 and Ferritin | 60.0%-70.0% | 81.0%-89.0% | [45] |

FIT: Faecal immunochemical test.

**Table 2 Non-invasive DNA, messenger RNA and long non-coding RNA biomarkers used for colorectal cancer detection**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Study setting** | **Sample type** | **Marker type** | **Biomarker(s)** | **Sensitivity (or its range)** | **Specificity (or its range)** | **Ref.** |
| Screening | Stool | DNA mutation panel | 3 *K-ras* mutations, 10 *APC* mutations, 8 *p53* mutations, microsatellite instability marker BAT-26 and long DNA marker | 51.60% | 94.40% | [46] |
| Case-control | Stool | Panel including DNA mutation, DNA methylation, DNA amount and protein testing | *K-ras* mutation, methylation of *Vimentin* (*VIM), BMP3,* *NDRG4* and *TFPI2* genes, DNA measurement by *β-actin* amount assessment and HemoQuant test for haemoglobin | 78.0%-85.0% | 85.0%-90.0% | [47] |
| Screening | Stool | Panel including DNA mutation, DNA methylation, DNA amount and protein testing | *K-ras* mutation, *BMP3* and *NDRG4* promoter methylation, DNA measurement by *β-actin* amount assessment and test for haemoglobin (FIT) | 92.30% | 86.60% | [48] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *BMP3* gene | 51.0%-84.0% | 90.0%-100.0% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *CDKN2A* gene | 20.0%-40.0% | 84.0%-100.0% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *ECAD* gene | 65.20% | 88.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *FBN1* gene | 72.00% | 93.30% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *GATA 4/5* gene promoter | 42.9%-71.0% | 84.0%-95.0% | [49,50] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *HLTF* gene | 20.0%-37.5% | 90.0%-92.6% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *HIC1* gene | 42.30% | 98.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *HPP1* gene | 71.20% | 57.10% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *ING1b* gene | 73.70% | 95.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *ITGA4* gene | 40.00% | 96.80% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *MGMT* gene | 33.9-55.1% | 52.0%-100.0% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *NDRG4* gene promoter | 53.0%-92.0% | 89.1%-100.0% | [49-51] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *P16INK4A* gene | 71.70% | 86.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *PHACTR3* gene | 55.0%-66.0% | 95.0%-100.0% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *RASSF2* gene | 45.30% | 94.70% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *SDC2* gene | 81.10% | 93.30% | [52] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *SEPT9* gene | 20.0%-84.8% | 80.0%-94.5% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *SFRP1* gene | 26.4%-89.0% | 86.0%-95.5% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *SFRP2* gene | 32.1%-94.2% | 54.0%-100.0% | [49,51] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *SPG20* gene | 80.2%-89.0% | 99.0%-100.0% | [49,51] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *SNCA* gene | 83.90% | 75.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *TFPI2* gene | 63.3%-92.0% | 79.0%-100.0% | [49-51] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *TP53* gene | 56.30% | 100.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *Vimentin (VIM)* gene | 32.6%-86.0% | 82.0%-100.0% | [49-51] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *WIF1* gene | 19.3%-60.4% | 96.7%-99.4% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA | *XAF1* gene | 55.90% | 52.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *BMP3* and *NDRG4* genes | 98.00% | 90.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *MGMT* and *XAF1* genes | 73.50% | 52.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *MGMT-B* and *SFRP2* genes | 88.30% | 91.20% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *RASSF1A* and *SFRP2* genes | 75.00% | 89.40% | [51] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *SNCA* and *FNB1* genes | 84.30% | 93.30% | [53] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *Vimentin (VIM)* and *SFRP2* genes | 92.50% | 91.20% | [53] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *AGTR1, WNT2* and *SLIT2* genes | 74.0%-78.0% | 88.0%-89.0% | [49,50] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *ECAD, MGMT* and *P16INK4A* genes | 72.00% | 88.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *ITGA4, SFRP2* and *P16INK4A* genes | 70.00% | 96.80% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *MGMT*, *CDKN2A* and *hMTH1* genes | 55.00% | 63.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *MGMT*, *MLH1* and *Vimentin (VIM)* genes | 75.00% | 86.50% | [49,51] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *SFRP2*, *HPP1* and *MGMT* genes | 93.70% | 77.10% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *WIF-1*, *ALX-4* and *Vimentin (VIM)* genes | 25.00% | 98.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *Vimentin (VIM), OMSR* and *TFPI2* genes | 86.70% | 87.60% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Methylated DNA panel | *SFRP2*, *GATA4/5, NRDG4* and *Vimentin (VIM)* genes | 96.40% | 65.00% | [49] |
| Case-control | Stool | Human DNA amount | Total human DNA amount | 66.00% | 89.80% | [54] |
| Case-control | Bowel Lavage Fluid | Methylated DNA panel | *miR-124-3*, *LOC386758* and *SFRP1* genes | 82.00% | 79.00% | [55] |
| Case-control | Intrarectally collected colorectal mucus | Human DNA amount | Total human DNA amount | 60.40% | 94.80% | [56] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA | *ALX4* gene | 23.0%-90.7% | 72.5%-100.0% | [57] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA | *APC* gene | 57.0%-86.5% | 86.0%-92.1% | [57] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Methylated DNA | *CDH1 (E-cadherin)* gene | 60.00% | 84.00% | [55] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA | *SDC2* gene | 87.0%-90.7% | 72.5%-95.2% | [36,57] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA | *SEPT9* gene | 47.1-95.6% | 81.0%-96.7% | [36,57-62] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA | *SFRP2* gene | 54.0%-69.4% | 40.0%-98.7% | [57,63] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Methylated DNA | *THBD (Thrombomodulin)* gene | 70.70% | 80.30% | [51] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA | *TPEF* gene | 65.0%-81.0% | 69.0%-90.0% | [57] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA | *VIM (Vimentin)* gene | 59.0%-90.7% | 72.5%-93.0% | [57] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Hypomethylated DNA | LINE-1 transposable DNA element | 65.80% | 90.00% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA panel | *IKFZ* and *BCAT1* genes | 62.1%-95.0% | 92.0%-95.0% | [36,57] |
| Case-control | Serum | Methylated DNA panel | *SEPT9* and *SDC2* genes | 86.50% | 92.10% | [64] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | Methylated DNA panel | *APC, MGMT, RASSF2A* and *WIF-1* genes | 86.50% | 92.10% | [57] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Methylated DNA panel | *ALX4, BMP3, NPTX2, RARB, SDC2, SEPT9* and *VIM* genes | 90.70% | 72.50% | [63] |
| Case-control | Serum | ALU115 DNA amount | Free ALU115 DNA amount | 69.20% | 99.10% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | DNA integrity | ALU247/115 DNA integrity index | 73.10% | 97.30% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Free DNA amount | ALU-based cell-free DNA | 64.50% | 98.90% | [36] |
| Case-control | Whole blood | mRNA expression | *TSPAN8* gene | 83.60% | 58.20% | [36] |
| Case-control | Whole blood | mRNA expression | *LGALS* gene | 82.10% | 61.20% | [36] |
| Case-control | Whole blood | mRNA expression | *COL1A2* gene | 73.10% | 59.70% | [36] |
| Case-control | Whole blood | mRNA expression | *CEACAM6* gene | 65.70% | 61.20% | [36] |
| Case-control | Whole blood or serum | mRNA expression | *SALL4* gene | 85.9%-96.1% | 85.7%-95.0% | [65,66] |
| Case-control | Whole blood | mRNA expression panel | *TSPAN8* and *LGALS4* genes | 92.50% | 67.20% | [36] |
| Case-control (CRC and high-risk adenomas in the case group) | Whole blood | mRNA expression panel | *LGALS4, CEACAM6, TSPAN8* and *Col1A2* genes | 75.00% | 87.00% | [67] |
| Case-control | Whole blood | mRNA expression panel | *CEA, EpCAM, CK19, MUC1, EGFR* and *C-Met* genes | 87.00% | 85.00% | [68] |
| Case-control | Whole blood | Long non-coding RNA expression | NEAT1 variant 1 | 69.00% | 79% | [36] |
| Case-control | Whole blood | Long non-coding RNA expression | NEAT1 variant 2 | 70.00% | 96.00% | [36] |
| Case-control | Serum | Long non-coding RNA expression | BLACAT1 | 83.30% | 76.70% | [69] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Long non-coding RNA expression panel | ATB and CCAT1 | 82.00% | 75.00% | [70] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Long non-coding RNA expression panel | 91H, PVT-1 and MEG3 | 82.80% | 78.60% | [71] |
| Case-control | Serum | Long non-coding RNA expression panel | LOC285194, RP11-462C24.1 and Nbla12061 | 68.30% | 86.90% | [72] |

FIT: Faecal immunochemical test; CRC: Colorectal cancer.

**Table 3 Non-invasive microRNA biomarkers used for colorectal cancer detection**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Study setting** | **Sample type** | **Marker type** | **Biomarker(s) and detection methods** | **Sensitivity (or its range)** | **Specificity (or its range)** | **Ref.** |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-18a, upregulated | 61.00% | 69.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-20a, upregulated | 55.00% | 82.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-21, upregulated | 56.0%-86.0% | 73.0%-81.1% | [73,74] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-92a, upregulated | 72.00% | 73.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-106a, upregulated | 34.00% | 97.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-135b, upregulated | 78.00% | 68.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-144\*, upregulated | 74.00% | 87.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-221, upregulated | 62.00% | 74.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-223, upregulated | 77.00% | 96.00% | [75] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA | miR-451, upregulated | 88.00% | 100.00% | [75] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA panel | miR-223 and mir-92a, both upregulated | 97.00% | 75.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA panel | miR-17-93 cluster and miR-135b, all upregulated | 74.00% | 79.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Stool | MicroRNA panel | miR-144-5p, miR-451a and miR-20b-5p, all upregulated | 66.00% | 95.00% | [76] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-17-3p, upregulated | 64.00% | 70.00% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-18a, upregulated | 73.10% | 79.10% | [77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-20a, upregulated | 46.00% | 73.40% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | MicroRNA | miR-21, upregulated | 65.0%-91.4% | 74.4%-95.0% | [73,77-79] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-24, downregulated | 78.40% | 83.80% | [77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-29a, upregulated | 69.00% | 89.10% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | MicroRNA | miR-29b, downregulated | 61.4%-77.0% | 72.5%-75.0% | [77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-92, upregulated | 89.00% | 70.00% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum/plasma | MicroRNA | miR-92a, upregulated | 65.5%-84.0% | 71.2%-82.5% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-96, upregulated | 65.40% | 73.30% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-106a, upregulated | 74.00% | 44.40% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-139-3p, downregulated | 96.60% | 97.80% | [80] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-139a-5p, upregulated | 76.70% | 88.00% | [81] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-155, upregulated | 58.20% | 95.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-182, upregulated | 78.00% | 91.00% | [82] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-194, downregulated | 72.00% | 80.00% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-196b, upregulated | 63.00% | 87.40% | [84] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-200c, upregulated | 64.10% | 73.30% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-210, upregulated | 74.6%-88.6% | 73.5%-90.1% | [77,79] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-221, upregulated | 86.00% | 41.00% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-320a, downregulated | 92.80% | 73.10% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-338-5p, upregulated | 76.30% | 92.50% | [84] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-372, upregulated | 81.90% | 73.30% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-375, downregulated | 76.90% | 64.60% | [77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-423-5p, downregulated | 91.90% | 70.80% | [77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-506, upregulated | 76.80% | 60.70% | [85] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-601, downregulated | 69.20% | 72.40% | [77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-760, downregulated | 80.00% | 72.40% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA | miR-1290, upregulated | 70.10% | 91.20% | [86] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA | miR-4316, upregulated | 76.80% | 75.00% | [85] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-19a and miR-19b, both upregulated | 78.60% | 77.40% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA panel | miR-21 and miR-92a, both upregulated | 68.00% | 91.20% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-29a and miR-92a, both upregulated | 83.00% | 84.70% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-200c and miR-18a, both upregulated | 84.60% | 75.60% | [36,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-223 and miR-92a, both upregulated | 76.00% | 71.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-320d, downregulated; miR-1290, upregulated | 81.20% | 90.70% | [87] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-431 and miR-139-p3, both upregulated | 91.00% | 57.00% | [77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-601 and miR-760, both downregulated | 83.30% | 69.10% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-19a, miR-19b and miR-15b, all upregulated | 78.60% | 79.20% | [77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-24, miR-320a and miR-423-5p, all downregulated | 92.80% | 70.80% | [36,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-144-3p, miR-425-5p and miR-1260b, all downregulated | 93.80% | 91.30% | [88] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA panel | miR-145, downregulated; miR-106a and miR-17-3p, upregulated | 78.50% | 82.80% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-409-3p, upregulated; miR-7 and miR-93, downregulated | 82.00% | 89.00% | [73,77] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-18a, miR-21, miR-22 and miR-25, all upregulated | 67.00% | 90.00% | [89] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA panel | miR-23a-3p, miR-27a-3p, miR-142-5p and miR-376c-3p, all upregulated | 89.00% | 81% | [36] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-29a, miR-92a, upregulated; miR-601, miR-760, downregulated | 83.30% | 93.10% | [77] |
| Case-control | Serum | MicroRNA panel | miR-21, miR-29, miR-92, miR-125, miR-223, all upregulated | 84.70% | 98.70% | [78] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-19a, miR-19b, miR-15b, miR-29a, miR-335, miR-18a, all upregulated | 91.00% | 90.00% | [90] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-21, let-7g, upregulated, mir-31, mir-92a, miR-181b, miR-203, downregulated | 96.00% | 81.00% | [73] |
| Case-control | Plasma | MicroRNA panel | miR-103a-3p, miR-127-3p, miR-151a-5p, miR-17-5p, miR-181a-3p, miR-18a-5p, miR-18b-5p, all upregulated | 76.90% | 86.70% | [91] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Exosomal MicroRNA panel | miR-27a, miR-130a, both upregulated | 82.50% | 75.00% | [92] |
| Case-control | Saliva | MicroRNA | miR-21, upregulated | 97.00% | 91.00% | [93] |

**Table 4 Non-invasive volatile organic compounds and small metabolite biomarkers used for colorectal cancer detection**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Study setting** | **Sample type** | **Marker type** | **Biomarker(s) and detection methods** | **Sensitivity (or its range)** | **Specificity (or its range)** | **Ref.** |
| Case-control | Stool | VOCs | Hydrogen sulphide, Dimethylsulphide, Dimethyldisulphide, *mlz* 90 - detected by selected ion flow tube (SIFT) mass spectrometry (MS) | 72.00% | 78.00% | [94] |
| Case-control | Stool | VOCs | Propan-2-ol, 3-methylbutanoic acid - detected by gas chromatography (GC) and MS | 87.90% | 84.60% | [95] |
| Case-control | Stool | VOCs | Methyl mercaptan (increased) and hydrogen (decreased) – detected by GC | 90.00% | 57.70% | [96] |
| Case-control | Stool | VOCs | Pattern recognition technique - canine scent judgment | 97.00% | 99.00% | [97] |
| Case-control | Stool | VOCs | Pattern recognition technique (eNose Cyranose® 320) | 85.00% | 87.00% | [94] |
| Case-control | Stool | VOCs | Pattern recognition technique (SCENT A1) | 95.00% | 95.00% | [98] |
| Case-control | Urine | VOCs | Ion mobility spectroscopy technology (FAIMS) | 88.00% | 60.00% | [99] |
| Case-control | Urine | VOCs | Ion mobility spectroscopy technology (FAIMS) | 63.00% | 63.00% | [100] |
| Case-control | Urine | VOCs | Pattern recognition technique (eNose applied) | 78.00% | 79.00% | [99] |
| Case-control | Breath | VOCs | Pattern recognition technique - canine scent judgment | 91.00% | 99.00% | [97] |
| Case-control | Breath | VOCs | Acetone (increased), ethyl acetate (increased), ethanol (decreased) and 4-methyl octane (decreased) detected by GC-MS | 85.00% | 94.00% | [99] |
| Case-control | Breath | VOCs | Nonanal, decanal, 4-methyl-pentanone, 2-methylbutane, 4-methyloctane, 4-methylundecane, 2-methylpentane, methylcyclopentane, cycloxehane, methylcyclohexane, trimethyldecane-1,2-pentadiene, 1,3-dimethylbenzene, 1,4-dimethylbenzene – detected by GC-MS | 86.00% | 83.00% | [99] |
| Case-control | Stool | Magnetic resonance spectra | Magnetic resonance spectra patterns | 85.20% | 86.90% | [101] |
| Case-control | Stool | Small metabolites | Acetate – detected by proton magnetic resonance spectroscopy (PMRS) | 94.70% | 92.30% | [102] |
| Case-control | Stool | Small metabolites | Succinate – detected by PMRS | 91.20% | 93.50% | [102] |
| Case-control | Serum | Aromatic carboxylic acids | Benzoic acid – detected by CE-time of flight (TOF) MS | 89.00% | 82.00% | [103] |
| Case-control | Serum | Fatty acids | GTA-446 – detected by flow injection analysis MS | 83.30% | 84.80% | [104] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Amino acid metabolites | L-kynurenine – detected by high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) | 85.20% | 100.00% | [105] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Fatty acids | Decanoic acid – detected by CE-TOFMS | 87.80% | 80.00% | [106] |
| Case-control | Serum | Multiple metabolites | 38 metabolites detected by GC-MS | 85.00% | 86.00% | [107] |
| Case-control | Serum | Phospholipids (sphingomyelins and phosphatidylcholines) | SM (34:1), PC (34:1), PC (34:2), PC (36:4), PC (36:2), PC (36:3) - detected by MS | ♂77.3%; ♀80.8% | ♂92.4%; ♀85.9% | [108] |
| Case-control | Serum | Unsaturated free fatty acids (panel) | C16:1, C18:3, C20:4, C22:6, all downregulated – detected by MS | 93.80% | 92.20% | [109] |
| Case-control | Serum | Amino acids (panel) | 8 amino acids – detected by LC-MS/MS | 65.00% | 95.00% | [110] |
| Case-control | Serum | Amino acids, fatty acids, carbohydrates | 13 metabolites – detected by LC-MS/MS | 96.00% | 80.00% | [111] |
| Case-control | Serum | Metabolite panel | 2-hydroxy-butyrate, aspartic acid, kynurenine, cystamine – detected by GC-MS | 83.10% | 81.00% | [112] |
| Case-control | Serum | Lipid metabolites (panel) | Palmitic amide, oleamide, hexadecaneodioic acid, octadecanoic acid, eicosatrienoic acid, LPC(18:2), LPC(20:4), LPC(22:6), myristic acid, LPC(16:0) – detected by ion cyclotron resonance MS | 98.10% | 100.00% | [113] |
| Case-control | Serum | Panel of hydroxylated polyunsaturated ultra long-chain fatty acids | C28H46O4, C28H48O4 and C28H50O4, all downregulated – detected by LC-MS/MS and nuclear MR | 75.00% | 90.00% | [114] |
| Case-control | Serum | Multiple metabolites (panel) | 11,14-eicosadienoic acid, 12a-hydroxy-3-oxocholadienic acid, 12-ketodeoxycholic acid, 12-keto-tetrahydro-leukotriene B4, 13-cis-retinoic acid, 1b-hydrocholic acid, 1-methylhistamine, 1-monopalmitin, 2,3-dihydroxybutanoic acid, 24-hydroxycalcitriol – detected by GC-TOFMS and UPLC-QTOFMS | 83.70% | 91.70% | [115] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Amino acids, fatty acids, carbohydrates | 8 metabolites – detected by CT-TQMS | 99.30% | 93.80% | [116] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Choline-containing phospholipids (panel) | Total saturated lysophosphatidylcholines (LPCs), 18:2 LPC and sphingosylphosphorylcholine – detected by LC-MS/MS | 88.30% | 80.00% | [117] |
| Case-control | Plasma | Choline-containing phospholipids (panel) | Total saturated lysophosphatidylcholines (LPCs) and the difference between 18:2 LPC and 18:1 LPC – detected by LC-MS | 82.00% | 93.00% | [118] |
| Case-control | Dried blood | Amino acids and acylcarnitines (panel) | C16, Arg, C4/C8, C5/C3, Val, Phe/Tyr, Ala, C4/C3 – detected by direct infusion MS | 81.20% | 83.90% | [119] |
| Case-control | Urine | Polyamines | N1, N12-diacetylspermine – detected by ELISA | 75.80% | 96.00% | [120] |
| Case-control | Urine | Polyamines and amino acid metabolites | N1, N12-diacetylspermine and kynurenine – detected by LC-MS | 80.00% | 80.00% | [121] |
| Case-control | Urine | Amino acids and acetoacetate (panel) | Alanine, glutamine, aspartic acid and acetoacetate – detected by PMRS | 87.50% | 91.30% | [122] |
| Case-control | Urine | Nucleosides (panel) | 5-hydroxymethyluracil and 8-oxo-7,8-dihydroguanine – detected by UPLC-MS/MS | 78.60% | 75.00% | [123] |
| Case-control | Urine | Nucleosides (panel) | Cytidine, 3-methylcitidine, 1-methyladenosine, 2-deoxyguanosine, adenosine, inosine – detected by HPLC-MS/MS | 69.00% | 98.00% | [124] |
| Case-control | Urine | Metabolite panel | Citrate, Hippurate, p-cresol, 2-aminobutyrate, myristate, putrescine and kynurenate - detected by UPLC-QTOFMS | 97.50% | 100% | [125] |
| Case-control | Urine | Nucleosides (panel) | Adenosine, N4-acetylcytidine, cytidine, guanosine, inosine, 1-methyladenosine, 1-methylguanosine, 1-methylinosine, 2-methylguanosine, 2,2-methylguanosine, N6-methyladenosine, uridine, 3-methyluridine+5-methyluridine, pseudouridine – detected by reverse phase HPLC | 76.90% | 90.40% | [126] |
| Case-control | Urine | Nucleosides (panel) | Adenosine, N4-acetylcytidine, cytidine, guanosine, inosine, 1-methyladenosine, 1-methylguanosine, 1-methylinosine, 2-methylguanosine, 2,2-methylguanosine, N6-methyladenosine, 5-methyluridine, pseudouridine, uridine – detected by column switching HPLC | 71.00% | 96.00% | [127] |

**Table 5 Non-invasive faecal bacterial biomarkers used for colorectal cancer detection**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Study setting** | **Sample type** | **Marker**  **type** | **Biomarker(s)** | **Sensitivity (or its range)** | **Specificity (or its range)** | **Ref.** |
| Case-control | Stool | Bacterial | *Fusobacterium nucleatum* | 54.0%-92.8% | 79.8%-91.0% | [128-131] |
| Case-control | Stool | Bacterial | *clbA*-positive bacteria | 56.4% | 81.5% | [131] |
| Case-control | Stool | Bacterial panel | *Fusobacterium nucleatum, Bacteroides clarus, Roseburia intestinalis* and *Clostridium hathewayi* | 92.8% | 79.8% | [130] |
| Case-control | Stool | Bacterial panel | *clbA*-positive bacteria and *Fusobacterium nucleatum* | 84.6% | 63.1% | [131] |
| Case-control | Stool | Bacterial panel | Ratio of *Fusobacterium nucleatum* to *Bifidobacterium* | 84.6% | 92.3% | [132] |
| Case-control | Stool | Bacterial panel | Combination of ratios of *Fusobacterium nucleatum* to *Bifidobacterium* and *Fusobacterium nucleatum* to *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii* | 90.0% | 90.2% | [132] |
| Case-control (CRC and adenomatous polyps in the case group) | Stool | Bacterial panel | *Fusobacterium nucleatum, Enterococcus faecalis, Streptococcus bovis, Enterotoxigenic Bacteroides fragilis,* and *Porphyromonas* spp | 91.4% | 93.5% | [133] |

CRC: Colorectal cancer.