

Colorectal Cancer: What You Need To Know

Colorectal Cancer

Colorectal cancer is cancer that starts in either the colon or the rectum. It remains a leading cause of cancer death for men and women in the United States, despite the fact that it is one of the most preventable forms of cancer.

One in 20 people will develop colorectal cancer in his or her lifetime; however, some factors greatly increase the risk of colorectal cancer.

Risk Factors

- **Age.** Colorectal cancers occur most often in people who are over the age of 50, and the risk increases as people get older.
- **Family history.** Having a first order relative (parent, sister or brother or child) who has had colorectal cancer increases a person's risk of developing this disease. The more family members who have had colon cancer, the higher the risk.
- **Polyps.** Most colorectal cancers develop in certain types of polyps or tissue growths. Polyps are noncancerous, but they may become cancerous over time.
- **Diet.** The risk of developing colon cancer seems to be higher in people whose diet is high in fat and low in fiber.
- **Polyps, ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease.** These long-term diseases cause inflammation of the lining of the colon. A history of these diseases greatly increases the risk of colon cancer. Special screening can find early cancer changes.
- **Tobacco use, obesity and lack of exercise.** Using tobacco, being overweight and not getting regular exercise can increase the risk of colon cancer.

Symptoms

The following symptoms may be the result of colorectal cancer. Warning signs may include:

- rectal bleeding
- blood in or on the stool (bright red or very dark in color)
- stools that are narrower than usual for some period of time
- consistent pain during bowel movements
- constipation or diarrhea lasting more than one month
- general stomach discomfort (bloating, fullness, cramps, gas pains) for a period of time
- a feeling that the bowel does not empty completely
- weight loss for no reason
- constant tiredness
- vomiting.

These symptoms can also be caused by other problems such as ulcers, an inflamed colon or hemorrhoids. If you develop any of these symptoms, see your health care provider to determine the cause.

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Screening/Early Detection Guidelines

Colorectal cancer responds best to treatment when it is diagnosed and treated as early as possible. You can take an active role in early detection by knowing when you should be screened (checked) for colorectal cancer.

Talk with your health care provider about screening guidelines if you:

- are between 50 and 75 years old
- have no personal history of polyps or colorectal cancer
- do not have a parent, sibling or child diagnosed with colorectal cancer before age 65
- do not have two first order relatives diagnosed with colorectal cancer at any age.

You and your health care provider can decide which screening is best for you:

- a yearly stool test to check for hidden blood in the stool
- a flexible sigmoidoscopy every 5 years
- a colonoscopy every 10 years.

If you have risks and/or a family history of colorectal cancer, you may need screening before age 50. Talk about this with your health care provider.

Prevention

The following suggestions can promote colorectal health.

- Get regular screening tests.
- Keep a record of cancers or polyps if they occur in your parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and children.
- Eat a diet low in fat and high in fiber. Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- Do not smoke and do not drink too much alcohol.
- Get regular exercise and maintain a healthy weight.

If you have any questions or concerns, please talk with your health care provider.

Information adapted in part from the American Cancer Society.