

Colorectal Cancer: Preventable, Treatable, Beatable

The second leading cause of cancer death is from colorectal cancer (cancer of the colon or rectum). Colorectal cancer usually starts from polyps (growths) in the colon or rectum. Over time, these polyps can turn into cancer. People who have polyps or colorectal cancer sometimes don't have symptoms, especially at first. This makes screening tests, which detect both the pre-cancerous polyps and the cancerous growths, the most important tool for early detection and early treatment.

Who Has an Increased Risk of Colorectal Cancer?

The following are more likely to develop colorectal cancer:

- Men and women over 50 years of age.
- Those who have a close relative (parent, brother, sister) with a history of this disease.
- A person with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis).
- Someone who has already had colorectal cancer or polyps in the past has an increased risk for developing it a second time. Women who have had breast, ovarian or uterine cancer also have increased risk.
- A person who eats a diet high in animal fat.
- A smoker.

Screening Tests Can Save a Life

Beginning at age 50, the following screening tests should be done:

- **Fecal occult blood test (FOBT).** This test detects blood in the stool, which is cause for more testing to determine its origin. This test should be done yearly.
- **Flexible Sigmoidoscopy.** This test checks for polyps or cancer inside the rectum and lower third of the colon. It should be done every five years.
- **Colonoscopy.** Similar to a sigmoidoscopy, this test examines the anus, rectum, entire colon and appendix. Polyps that are found can be removed during the procedure. A colonoscopy is typically done every 10 years, but may also be done as a follow-up test if anything unusual is found during one of the other screening tests.
- **Double contrast barium enema.** This test is an x-ray of the colon, making it easy to see polyps and other abnormalities. It should be done every 5 years.
- **Digital rectal exam.** This exam is part of a routine physical examination to feel for any abnormal areas in the rectum. This test should be done annually.

Symptoms

Symptoms typically do not show up in the early stages. As the disease progresses, some of the following symptoms may be noticed: a change in bowel habits, blood in the stool, stools that are narrower than usual, diarrhea, constipation or feeling that bowel does not completely empty, abdominal discomfort (gas pains, bloating, fullness, cramps), weight loss for no known reason, fatigue or vomiting. Anyone with these symptoms should consult with a doctor.

Prevention

Regular exercise may reduce a person's chances of developing the colorectal polyps than can become cancerous. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables and low in fat can help prevent colorectal and other cancers. Colorectal cancer can be treated and cured if detected early, a result best achieved by scheduling regular screenings with a physician.

For more information see the following websites:

http://www.cancer.org/docroot/PED/ped_5.asp
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/colon-and-rectal>