

Cancer of the Colon and Rectum (Colorectal Cancer)

DEFINITION

The colon (large intestine) and rectum make up the final segment of the digestive tract. It is the lower four to five feet of the intestine that travels around the borders of your abdominal area. The rectum is the last four to five inches at the end of the colon. Cancer can develop anywhere along the digestive tract. Cancer of the colon and rectum is called colorectal cancer. Colorectal cancer is potentially one of the most curable cancers if detected early.

INCIDENCE

- Second leading cause of death from cancer and it affects men and women equally
- 160,000 new cases are diagnosed each year in the United States.

RISK FACTORS

- Age over 40
- Family history of colon cancer or multiple polyps in a parent, sibling or other family member
- History of colon, breast or uterine cancer, Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis
- High fat and low fiber diet.

WARNING SIGNS

- Diarrhea or constipation
- Blood in stool (bright red or very dark)
- Stools that are narrower than usual
- General stomach discomfort (bloating, fullness, cramps)
- Frequent gas pains
- A feeling that the bowel does not empty completely
- Weight loss with no known reason
- Constant tiredness.

These symptoms can be caused by a number of problems such as the flu, ulcers and inflamed colon or cancer. It is important to see your physician if any of these symptoms last longer than two weeks.

EARLY DETECTION

The American Cancer Society recommends three tests as valuable aids in detecting colon and rectal cancer early in people without symptoms:

- A physician should perform a digital rectal exam during an office visit every year after age 50
- Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) is recommended every year after age 50. One of the earliest signs of colorectal cancer is often occult (hidden) blood in the stool
- Screening sigmoidoscopy every three to five years after age 50. This is an exam of the rectum and lower colon using a sigmoidoscope. The physician looks through a thin, lighted tube to check for polyps, tumors or other abnormalities.

PREVENTION

- Decrease fat in the diet
- Increase fiber (bulk) in diet, such as whole grains, bran, fresh fruits and vegetables
- Yearly physical exam by your physician.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- National Cancer Institute Information Service at 800 4-CANCER (422-6237) or www.cancer.gov
- American Cancer Society at 800-ACS-2345 or www.cancer.org