

## **General Information about Colon Cancer**

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- Colon cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancer) cells form in the tissues of the colon.
- Health history can affect the risk of developing colon cancer.
- Signs of colon cancer include blood in the stool or a change in bowel habits.
- Tests that examine the colon and rectum are used to detect (find) and diagnose colon cancer.
- Certain factors affect prognosis (chance of recovery) and treatment options.

### **Colon cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancer) cells form in the tissues of the colon.**

The colon is part of the body's digestive system. The digestive system removes and processes nutrients (vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, fats, proteins, and water) from foods and helps pass waste material out of the body. The digestive system is made up of the esophagus, stomach, and the small and large intestines. The colon (large bowel) is the first part of the large intestine and is about 5 feet long.

Together, the rectum and anal canal make up the last part of the large intestine and are about 6-8 inches long. The anal canal ends at the anus (the opening of the large intestine to the outside of the body).

### **Health history can affect the risk of developing colon cancer.**

Anything that increases your chance of getting a disease is called a risk factor. Having a risk factor does not mean that you will get cancer; not having risk factors doesn't mean that you will not get cancer. Talk with your doctor if you think you may be at risk. Risk factors include the following:

- A family history of cancer of the colon or rectum.

- Certain hereditary conditions, such as familial adenomatous polyposis and hereditary nonpolyposis colon cancer (HNPCC; Lynch Syndrome).
- A history of ulcerative colitis (ulcers in the lining of the large intestine) or Crohn disease.
- A personal history of cancer of the colon, rectum, ovary, endometrium, or breast.
- A personal history of polyps (small areas of bulging tissue) in the colon or rectum.

**Signs of colon cancer include blood in the stool or a change in bowel habits.**

These and other signs and symptoms may be caused by colon cancer or by other conditions. Check with your doctor if you have any of the following:

- A change in bowel habits.
- Blood (either bright red or very dark) in the stool.
- Diarrhea, constipation, or feeling that the bowel does not empty all the way.
- Stools that are narrower than usual.
- Frequent gas pains, bloating, fullness, or cramps.
- Weight loss for no known reason.
- Feeling very tired.
- Vomiting.

**Tests that examine the colon and rectum are used to detect (find) and diagnose colon cancer.**

The following tests and procedures may be used:

- **Physical exam and history:** An exam of the body to check general signs of health, including checking for signs of disease, such as lumps or anything else that seems unusual. A history of the patient's health habits and past illnesses and treatments will also be taken.
- **Digital rectal exam:** An exam of the rectum. The doctor or nurse inserts a lubricated, gloved finger into the rectum to feel for lumps or anything else that seems unusual.
- **Fecal occult blood test:** A test to check stool (solid waste) for blood that can only be seen with a microscope. Small samples of stool are placed on special

cards and returned to the doctor or laboratory for testing.

- **Barium enema:** A series of x-rays of the lower gastrointestinal tract. A liquid that contains barium (a silver-white metallic compound) is put into the rectum. The barium coats the lower gastrointestinal tract and x-rays are taken. This procedure is also called a lower GI series.
- **Sigmoidoscopy:** A procedure to look inside the rectum and sigmoid (lower) colon for polyps (small areas of bulging tissue), other abnormal areas, or cancer. A sigmoidoscope is inserted through the rectum into the sigmoid colon. A sigmoidoscope is a thin, tube-like instrument with a light and a lens for viewing. It may also have a tool to remove polyps or tissue samples, which are checked under a microscope for signs of cancer.
- **Colonoscopy:** A procedure to look inside the rectum and colon for polyps, abnormal areas, or cancer. A colonoscope is inserted through the rectum into the colon. A colonoscope is a thin, tube-like instrument with a light and a lens for viewing. It may also have a tool to remove polyps or tissue samples, which are checked under a microscope for signs of cancer.
- **Virtual colonoscopy>:** A procedure that uses a series of x-rays called computed tomography to make a series of pictures of the colon. A computer puts the pictures together to create detailed images that may show polyps and anything else that seems unusual on the inside surface of the colon. This test is also called colonography or CT colonography.
- **Biopsy:** The removal of cells or tissues so they can be viewed under a microscope by a pathologist to to check for signs of cancer.

### **Certain factors affect prognosis (chance of recovery) and treatment options.**

The prognosis (chance of recovery) and treatment options depend on the following:

- The stage of the cancer (whether the cancer is in the inner lining of the colon only or has spread through the colon wall, or has spread to lymph nodes or other places in the body).
- Whether the cancer has blocked or made a hole in the colon.
- Whether there are any cancer cells left after surgery.
- Whether the cancer has recurred.
- The patient's general health.

The prognosis also depends on the blood levels of carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA) before treatment begins. CEA is a substance in the blood that may be increased when cancer is present.

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