

COLON CANCER WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW

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The 'colon' is the medical name for the large intestine. The colon begins at the caecum, continues through the ascending (going up, on the right side), transverse (across), descending (coming down on the left side), sigmoid and finally ends in the rectum and anal canal, the anus being the very end of the large intestine. Cancer can arise in any area of the large intestine.

In this country, cancer of the colon is the fourth most common cancer in men, after cancer of the skin, prostate and lung cancer, according to the National Cancer Institute. Women are affected by this cancer too, and it is also the fourth most common cancer in women, after skin, lung and breast according to the National Cancer Institute.

The exact cause of colon cancer is still unknown despite a lot of research. However; certain risk factors have been shown to increase the risk, as follows

- Age—above 50 years, more than 90% of these cancers are diagnosed after age 50.
- Polyps—most polyps are not cancerous, but cancer most commonly starts in a polyp, therefore it is important to find and remove polyps
- Family history of colon cancer—especially if first degree relatives such as brother, father had the disease
- Cancer genes—these account for a very small number of cases (2 to 3 in a 100), however; if these genes are present, cancer is likely to occur at a younger age.
- Having colon cancer yourself, or in women; if breast, endometrium or ovarian cancer has been diagnosed
- People with inflammatory bowel problems such as Ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease
- Diet—such as a high fat, low fiber, low calcium,
- Cigarette smoking increases the risk

Because colon cancer does not cause any symptoms in its very early stages, it makes sense to screen for this cancer, and there are simple ways in which to do this screening. People who should obtain screening are

- people 50 years and older
- people who have a family history of colon cancer, who may need screening earlier than 50 years

The ways in which to be screened are

- Digital Rectal Examination by your physician done every year
- Fecal Occult Blood Testing in three samples of stool on three different days
- Sigmoidoscopy every five years looks for polyps in the sigmoid colon
- Colonoscopy every ten years looks for polyps in the entire colon
- Double Contrast Barium Enema every ten years, X rays look for polyps in the entire colon

If symptoms do occur, they may be the following

- change in bowel habits
- chronic diarrhea, constipation or feeling of incomplete evacuation
- blood in the stool
- abdominal bloating
- tiredness, weight loss without reason
- stools that look 'narrower' than usual
- lump in the abdomen

Most of the times these symptoms are not due to cancer, but it is important to obtain a doctor's opinion, to find the cause.

Please obtain screening for colon cancer because if detected early, the cancer can be treated. Talk to your doctor about any concerns and questions that you may have.