

Colon Cancer

Cancer is a general term to describe a number of conditions that cause abnormal and unchecked growth of cells. There are many types of cancers.

Colon cancer, sometimes called “**colorectal cancer**,” is located in the **colon** (also referred to as the large intestine or the large bowel) or in the **rectum** (the muscular tube that connects the colon to the anus). Colon cancer is one of the most common types of cancer, and is a major cause of

cancer deaths.

Being screened for colon cancer is important, especially if a person has a risk factor for getting the disease. (See “Risk Factors for Colon Cancer”). Early detection of colon cancer can save lives by detecting the disease before it spreads.

An article in the December 20, 2000, issue of *JAMA* discusses one of the treatments for colon cancer—surgical removal of the cancerous tissue.

RISK FACTORS FOR COLON CANCER:

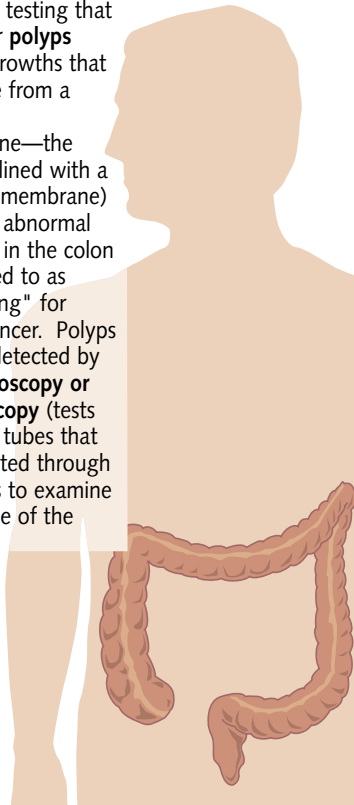
The following conditions may put you at higher risk for colon cancer:

- Colon cancer can occur at any age, but people over the age of 50 are at higher risk than those who are younger
- Having some types of polyps in your colon (even though polyps are not necessarily cancerous)
- Having had some other types of cancers
- Having a blood relative, especially a “first-degree relative” (parent, brother, sister, or child), who has had colorectal cancer
- Having had inflammatory disease of the colon, such as **ulcerative colitis** (recurring inflammation of the inner surface of the colon—the mucosa) or **Crohn’s disease** (recurring inflammation of the intestines that can cause damage that penetrates all layers of the colon)
- Having a diet that is low in fiber and high in fat
- Having a diet mostly from animal sources
- Not being physically active
- Being obese

Having one of the above conditions does not necessarily mean that you will get colon cancer. It only means that you may be at risk.

SCREENING FOR COLON CANCER:

Tests for **fecal occult blood** (blood in the stool) or testing that looks for **polyps** (tissue growths that protrude from a mucous membrane—the colon is lined with a mucous membrane) or other abnormal growths in the colon is referred to as “screening” for colon cancer. Polyps can be detected by **sigmoidoscopy** or **colonoscopy** (tests that use tubes that are inserted through the anus to examine the inside of the colon).



LOWERING YOUR RISK OF COLON CANCER:

The following may lower your risk for colon cancer:

- Let your doctor know if anyone in your family has had colon cancer so that he or she can screen you for the disease
- Detect polyps in the colon early and have them removed (see “Screening for Colon Cancer”)
- Eat a diet high in fiber (fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are high in fiber)
- Eat a diet low in fat. Fat should be less than 30% of calorie intake
- Maintain your ideal weight (for your sex, height, and frame) or if you are overweight, lose weight
- Limit the amount of animal fat (such as from meat and high-fat dairy products) in your diet
- Become more physically active

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Colorectal Cancer: The Importance of Prevention and Early Detection
888/842-6355 or www.cdc.gov/cancer
- National Cancer Institute
Cancer Information Service
800/4-CANCER
800/332-8615 (TTY)
or www.cancer.net
- American College of Gastroenterology
Colon Cancer Screening
<http://www.acg.gi.org>
- American Cancer Society
800/ACS-2345 or www.cancer.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA’s Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: National Cancer Institute, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American College of Gastroenterology, American Cancer Society, The AMA Home Medical Library, The AMA Family Medical Guide, The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine

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