

PSA IN GOOD HEALTH: COLORECTAL CANCER AWARENESS

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the large intestine (colon), which is the final part of your digestive tract. Rectal cancer is cancer that forms in your rectum. Most cases of colorectal cancer begin as small, noncancerous (benign) clumps of cells called adenomatous polyps. Over time, some of these polyps can become cancers. Polyps may be small and produce few, if any, symptoms. **This is why screening colonoscopies are so important—they help prevent colorectal cancer by identifying and removing polyps before they turn into cancer.**

SYMPTOMS

- A change in your bowel habits, including diarrhea or constipation or a change in the consistency of your stool, that lasts longer than four weeks
- Rectal bleeding or blood in your stool
- Persistent abdominal discomfort, such as cramps, gas, or pain
- A feeling that your bowel doesn't empty completely
- Weakness or fatigue
- Unexplained weight loss

Many people with colorectal cancer experience no symptoms in the early stages of the disease. When symptoms appear, they'll likely vary, depending on the cancer's size and location in your large intestine.

CAUSES

In most cases, it's not clear what causes colorectal cancer. Doctors know that colorectal cancer occurs when healthy cells in the colon develop errors in their genetic blueprint, the DNA. Healthy cells grow and divide in an orderly way to keep your body functioning normally. But when a cell's DNA is damaged and becomes cancerous, cells continue to divide—even when new cells aren't needed. As the cells accumulate, they form a tumor. With time, the cancer cells can grow to invade and destroy normal tissue nearby, and cancerous cells can travel to other parts of the body to form deposits there (metastasis).

RISK FACTORS

- Older age (50 and up)
- African-American heritage
- A personal history of colorectal cancer or polyps
- Inflammatory intestinal conditions
- Inherited syndromes that increase colorectal cancer risk
- Family history of colorectal cancer
- Low-fiber, high-fat diet
- A sedentary lifestyle
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- Smoking
- Alcohol

PREVENTION AND LIFESTYLE CHANGES

People with an average risk of colorectal cancer can consider screening beginning at age 50. But people with an increased risk, such as those with a family history of colorectal cancer, should consider screening sooner.

You can take steps to reduce your risk of colorectal cancer by making changes in your everyday life:

- Eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains
- Drink alcohol in moderation, if at all
- Stop smoking
- Exercise most days of the week
- Maintain a healthy weight

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