

Monthly
Wellness
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IN GOOD HEALTH

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COLON CANCER

According to the American Cancer Society, colon cancer effects more than 200,000 individuals each year. This cancer begins in the large intestine (the colon), which is the last part of the digestive tract that removes any remaining food after all of the nutrients have been removed.

Although it most frequently affects adults older than 50, colon cancer may develop at any age. It usually begins as a polyp, which left untreated, turns into cancer. Polyps are usually small and produce no symptoms; the only way to detect them is through routine colonoscopy screenings.

The earlier colon cancer is diagnosed, the better your prognosis. There are multiple treatments available to help treat and control it, including surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, medications, and targeted immunology therapy.

Understand the common signs and symptoms of colon cancer:

- **Constipation:** In most cases, this fairly common condition isn't a cause for concern on its own. Constipation can be a result of dehydration or lack of fiber. If this is a new symptom for you, speak to your doctor, as colon cancer tumors in the bowels can block stool from passing through.
- **Diarrhea:** Diarrhea can also be caused by things other than colon cancer, such as a virus, certain foods, or stress. If diarrhea is a new and/or persistent issue, speak to your doctor.
- **Rectal Bleeding/Dark Colored Stools:** Your stool color can vary depending on what you eat, but generally it is a light to medium brown in color. If it is darker than usual, black, or if you see blood, it could be a cause for concern. Tumors within your colon can become irritated and bleed. If your stools are black and tarry for several days or if you see bleeding, contact your doctor right away.
- **Thin/Narrow Stools:** Although the shape and size of your stool can vary, it's generally wide. If your stool takes on a pencil-like thickness for many days, contact your doctor.
- **Abdominal Cramping:** If you have persistent abdominal discomfort such as cramps, gas, or pain, contact your doctor.
- **Fatigue and Weakness:** Cancer compromises your immune system, and it goes into overdrive to fight the cancer. This takes a ton of energy! If fatigue/weakness is a new and persistent issue, speak to your doctor.
- **A Feeling Like Your Bowel is Not Emptying:** If you have this symptom, talk to a doctor, as tumors in your colon can block stool from leaving your body.
- **Unexplained Weight Loss:** If you are losing weight without trying, contact your doctor. Many people lose their appetite, likely due to the fact that the digestive system is not working appropriately.

How to reduce your risk

- Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables
- Drink alcohol only in moderation, if at all
- Don't smoke
- Get at least 30 minutes of exercise most days
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Drink water

If you notice any persistent symptoms that are of concern, make an appointment to see your doctor. If you have put off your colonoscopy, make an appointment to get it done.