

Colon Cancer - General Information

Cancer of the colon is also called colorectal cancer as it can arise in both the colon (the lower part of the digestive tract) and in the very lowest section of the colon, which is known as the rectum. It is a serious condition that affects the colon, the rectum and the appendix. In this disease, which is often insidious in its development, malignant cells proliferate in the tissues of the colon.

One of the more obvious presentations of colon cancer is chronic blood loss in the stool, often dark blood or black patches in the stools themselves. Colon cancer is among the commonest cancers in the Western world, with more than 104000 new diagnoses being made every year.

The most important risk factor for colon cancer is getting older; it is most commonly diagnosed in people over the age of 50. Although many women complacently believe that bowel cancer is a man's disease, the incidence of colon cancer is essentially the same among men and women.

Colon cancer is a killer, but this is because it is not caught by the medical profession at an early stage. When cancer of the colon is caught in its early stages (with little metastatic spread) it can be 100% curable. Colonic cancer is one of those unusual cancers where testing and screening can prevent the disease. Failure to do so is responsible for the high mortality rate associated with this condition. It may be assumed that patients may be partly to blame; due to the embarrassment factor many people are reluctant or afraid to have their bottoms examined, but this is not the full picture. Unfortunately, the most common symptom of colon polyps and colon cancer is no symptoms at all, so the patient can't be blamed for that.

Whilst research on the genetic basis of colon cancer is ongoing, it is thought that diet plays a part. This type of cancer is encouraged by diets rich in animal fats and discouraged by diets full of vegetables. This is a reason why colon cancer is rarer in the Far East where there is less fat in the diet.

Most of the time, diagnosis of localized colon cancer is made via colonoscopy, where a flexible tube is placed into the colon with a tiny camera. This procedure can be done under sedation for more squeamish patients. Another diagnostic test which can be utilized is double contrast barium enema.

Once cancer has been found in the colon, staging tests are performed to find out whether the cancer has spread and, if so, to what degree. Colon cancer is staged (given a number, e.g. Stage 1, Stage 2, etc) according to the size of the tumor and if it has become invasive (spreading to surrounding tissues).

Experts theorize that colon cancer is one of the most preventable forms of cancer - if you take the right steps. Eat a healthy, fiber-rich diet and always visit the Doctor if you have any doubts at all. Pain or discomfort in the bowel, or blood in the stool, should all be indicators that you should be examined. If regular screening is available, conquer your embarrassment and get yourself checked out. Remember - catch it early and it's 100% curable!

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About the Author

Jessica Cander is a professional freelance writer specializing in articles for health related websites, including <http://www.goodnutritioncenter.com> . Read her latest, an information page about a gentle yet effective colon cleansing system, at <http://www.goodnutritioncenter.com/colon-cleanse.html>