



# Colon cancer

Colon cancer, also called colorectal cancer, is the fourth most common cancer in the U.S.,<sup>1</sup> accounting for about 10 percent of all cancers diagnosed for men and women.<sup>2</sup> Depending on how early colon cancer is diagnosed, survival rates are as good as 93 percent.<sup>3</sup> This is why prevention and regular screenings are so important.

## What is colon cancer?

Your colon is part of your large intestine. It removes water and nutrients from the food you eat and turns the rest into waste. Most colon cancers begin in cells that make and release mucus and other fluids.<sup>1</sup>

Normally, cells grow as your body needs them, replacing old cells as they die. If this process goes awry, new cells form more quickly than they are needed, or old and damaged cells do not die. Sometimes, the excess cells form a tumor.

A tumor can be benign (not cancerous, usually not life-threatening) or malignant. Malignant tumors are cancerous. They can grow into nearby organs and tissue, causing damage. Also, cancerous cells from the tumor can break off and spread to other parts of the body.<sup>1</sup> Generally, a person with colon cancer won't notice any symptoms until the disease is far advanced.<sup>3</sup>

## What's my risk?

The exact cause of colon cancer is unknown, although it is definitely not contagious. The following risk factors make a person more likely to develop colon cancer:<sup>1</sup>

- **Older than 50.** More than 90 percent of those diagnosed with colon cancer are over 50.
- **History of colorectal polyps.** These are growths on the inner wall of the colon or rectum, and they are very common in people over the age of 50. Sometimes these become cancerous, so it is important to have them removed.
- **Family history of colorectal cancer.** Having close relatives develop colon cancer at an early age is a sign that you may be more likely to develop it. Genetic testing can help determine your risk.
- **Personal history of cancer.** If you've already had colon cancer, or (for women) cancer of the ovary, uterus or breast, your risk is greater.
- **Ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease.** Long-term conditions that cause inflammation of the colon increase your risk.
- **High-fat, low-fiber diet.** The link between diet and colon cancer is still being studied, but some studies show a link between a diet high in animal fat and a colon cancer diagnosis.
- **Smoking.** Yet another reason to stop smoking cigarettes.

## Screening: How bad is it?

Not that bad. Some screenings can even be done at home, following instructions from your doctor. If everyone over age 50 had regular screening tests, at least 60 percent of deaths from colon cancer could be prevented.<sup>4</sup> During some screening procedures – performed in a hospital outpatient clinic or doctor's office – your doctor can remove any polyps before they have time to become cancerous.<sup>3</sup>

For nearly all screening methods, you'll need to follow certain dietary restrictions for a day or two prior to testing. For the in-office tests, you'll need to take laxatives or perform an enema so your colon is empty and clean. For most people, the preparation is the worst part of the screening process. During the screening, you can request sedation to relax you. If you use a sedative, you'll need someone to drive you home afterward and to stay with you while the sedative wears off.<sup>3</sup>

Your doctor will send any polyps or biopsy tissue samples removed during the test to a lab to be examined by a pathologist. Because colon cancer can actually be *prevented* by the removal of polyps,<sup>5</sup> you owe it to yourself and your loved ones to have yourself screened.

## What if I have cancer?

Colon cancer is treated differently depending on the stage. Typically, some combination of surgery, radiation, chemotherapy or targeted therapy is used. Targeted therapies are drugs that target the gene and protein changes in cancer-causing cells.<sup>3</sup> Colon cancer survival rates are good, especially with an early diagnosis.<sup>3</sup>

## Resources

The most important step in preventing colon cancer is having yourself screened. Talk to your doctor about your family history and risk factors, and determine the screening schedule that is right for you. Check out the Colorectal Cancer Health Center on *WebMD* for a risk-assessment tool, the latest research and prevention news, and online support groups for people diagnosed with colorectal cancer. Go to [webmd.com/colorectalcancer](http://webmd.com/colorectalcancer).

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### Sources

<sup>1</sup>National Cancer Institute, *What You Need to Know About Cancer of the Colon and Rectum* (May 26, 2006): [cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov) <sup>2</sup>American Cancer Society, *Cancer Facts & Figures 2009* (2009): [cancer.org](http://cancer.org) <sup>3</sup>American Cancer Society, *Detailed Guide: Colon and Rectum Cancer* (May 18, 2009): [cancer.org](http://cancer.org) <sup>4</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Colorectal Cancer Screening Saves Lives* (July 2009): [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov) <sup>5</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Colorectal Cancer Screening* (January 28, 2010): [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov)

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