



# Colon Cancer

## **What is Colon Cancer?**

The large bowel, the last part of the digestive tract, consists of the large intestine or colon (about 5 feet long) and the rectum (about 8 inches long). The colon stores and mobilizes waste until it is eliminated from the body while the rectum coordinates the process of evacuation. Colon cancer is caused by malignant cells growing in the wall of the colon. A majority of tumors begin as benign polyps or precancerous growths that enlarge over time and may be exposed to carcinogenic (cancer-causing) chemicals in the stool. Since this process can take many years, screening and early detection are important steps in curing the disease.

## **Who is at greatest risk for developing Colon Cancer?**

Colon cancer is the third most common form of cancer in the United States affecting approximately 130,000 individuals with more than 45,000 deaths annually. It affects men and women alike, but incidence is highest in African Americans, who are most likely to die from colon cancer. Data suggests that both hereditary and environmental factors play a role in the development of colon cancer, but the risk rises significantly after age 50. Individuals with a personal or family history of colon cancer, polyps, ulcerative colitis, or Crohns disease are all at higher risk. However 80 percent of new colon cancer cases are diagnosed in "low risk" individuals. These individuals usually have lifestyle habits such as diet high in fat and red meat (but low in fruits and vegetables), high caloric intake, low levels of physical activity, obesity, smoking and excessive alcohol intake.

## **What are the symptoms of Colon Cancer?**

The early stages of colon cancer may not have any symptoms, thus emphasizing the importance of screening tests. As the cancer progresses, such as a polyp growing into a tumor, bleeding or obstruction of the colon may cause the following symptoms: change in bowel habits (such as diarrhea, constipation or narrowing of the stool), bleeding from the rectum, blood in the stool or toilet after bowel movement, cramping or steady abdominal pain and/or feeling the need to have a bowel movement that is not relieved by doing so. Other conditions, such as infection, hemorrhoids and inflammatory bowel disease can also cause these symptoms.

## **What tests will I need?**

Since the early stages of colon cancer are usually asymptomatic, screening tests such as colonoscopies are important detection tools. If colon cancer is suspected, further testing is required for diagnosis. Test that help in the diagnosis include: Fecal Occult Blood Testing, Colonoscopy and Computed Tomography Scan (CT Scan).

## **What procedures will my general surgeon recommend?**

*Polypectomy: This is an outpatient procedure to remove polyps that requires minimal sedation and allows you to return to your normal activities usually the next day.*

*Colectomy: This procedure is the most common treatment for colon cancer and statistics show that more than 80 percent of early stage cancer patients that have a colectomy have no recurrence more than four years later. Depending on the size and extent of the tumor, the patient may require a partial (segmental) resection of the colon removing the part of the colon with the cancer as well as a portion surrounding tissue to reduce the chances of cancer cells remaining in the body. Nearby lymph nodes may also be removed for biopsy to determine if the cancer has metastasized. The surgeon will then reconnect the two ends of the remaining colon to allow normal bowel functioning. In some cases, if the bowel cannot be reconnected, then a colostomy (an opening in the abdominal wall to allow passage of stool outside the body) will be placed. This procedure takes approximately 1 to 2 hours and usually requires a hospital stay of 3 to 5 days.*