

Colorectal cancer: Prevention and early detection save lives

Written by

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Experts estimate that at least 60 percent of colorectal cancer deaths are preventable with appropriate screening. Colorectal cancer is cancer involving the lower parts of the digestive tract — the colon and rectum. It is the second-leading cause of cancer deaths and one of the most frequently diagnosed cancers in the United States.

Fortunately, we have made progress in reducing the rates of new colorectal cancers and associated deaths with declines in both over the last several years. These gains are largely due to screening and lifestyle changes. However, we clearly have room for significant improvement.

Some screening tests are designed to identify early cancers whereas others are designed to identify and/or remove polyps or precancerous growths. Polyps are common and are found in up to 20-30 percent of people at age 50. As certain polyps can turn into cancer over time, removal of these polyps can reduce a person's risk for developing colorectal cancer.

Currently, several choices are recommended for screening, individually or in combination. These tests include a colonoscopy every 10 years; a flexible sigmoidoscopy, barium enema or computed tomographic colonography (or virtual colonoscopy) every five years; or stool studies looking for blood or cancer DNA every year. Each of these tests have advantages and disadvantages, but any screening or early detection test is better than none.

As polyps and early colorectal cancer often have no associated symptoms, current recommendations suggest that everyone should have a colorectal cancer screening test performed at age 50 and regularly thereafter. Some individuals will require earlier or more frequent testing depending on their risk factors. These include a family or personal history of polyps, a family or personal history of colorectal cancer, inflammatory bowel disease such as Crohn's or ulcerative colitis or a genetic syndrome such as hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer or familial adenomatous

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polyposis syndrome.

Additionally, those who experience symptoms of colorectal cancer should see their doctor immediately. Symptoms include belly pain, change in bowel habits, including diarrhea or constipation, blood in the stool, unexplained weight loss or anemia (low blood counts) and a feeling that your bowel does not empty completely.

If a person develops a colorectal cancer and it is caught early enough, it can be cured with surgery, chemotherapy and/or radiation. If colorectal cancer is caught late or has spread extensively, there are still treatment options, but outcomes are significantly worse. As in most conditions in medicine, prevention and early detection lead to much better results for patients.

Finally, there are a few lifestyle changes in conjunction with screening that can also reduce colon cancer risk. These include losing weight, eating a balanced diet, which includes fruits and vegetables and minimizes processed and red meats, restricting alcohol consumption and quitting smoking. These changes also benefit many other aspects of one's health.

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