

Cancer of the Colon and Rectum

The colon is also called the large bowel or large intestine. It is the lower 5 to 6 feet of the digestive system. The last 8 to 10 inches of the colon is the rectum. Colon cancer, sometimes called colorectal cancer, is cancer that starts in the large intestine or rectum.

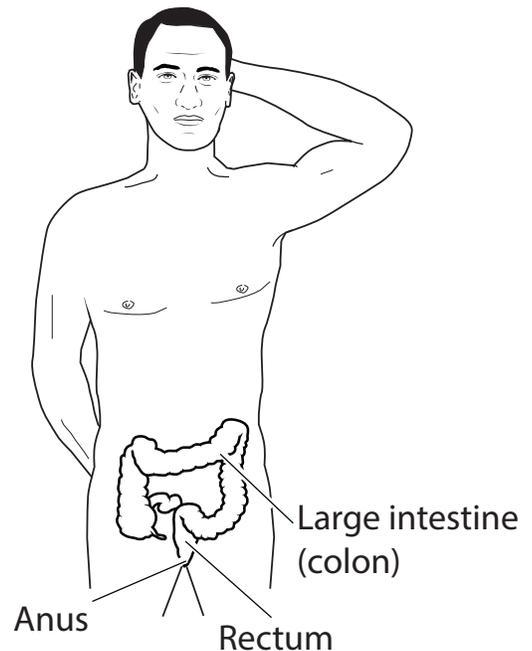
Cancer cells are abnormal cells. Cancer cells grow and divide more quickly than healthy cells. Some cancer cells may form growths called tumors. All tumors increase in size, but some tumors grow quickly, others slowly. Some cancer cells spread to other parts of the body through the blood and lymph systems.

Signs

Cancer of the colon and rectum often has no signs.

See your doctor if you have any of these signs:

- Dark or bright red blood in or on the stool
- Diarrhea or constipation that does not go away or other changes in bowel habits
- Pain in the lower abdomen
- Frequent gas pains, pressure, fullness or cramps in abdomen
- Loss of weight for no reason
- Feel tired or lack energy
- Stools are more narrow than usual for more than a few days. This may be from a tumor in the rectum.



Types of tumors

Tumors found in the colon or rectum can be benign or malignant.

- **Benign tumors are not cancer. They** do not spread to other parts of the body. They can be removed by surgery. **Cysts** are benign tumors that contain fluid.
- **Malignant tumors** are cancer. Cancer from these tumors may grow into the nearby tissues, organs or blood.

Tests

If your doctor thinks you may be at risk for cancer, you may have some of these tests:

- **Medical history** where your doctor will ask you questions about your signs and risk factors
- **Physical exam with a rectal exam** where the doctor inserts a gloved finger into your rectum to feel for lumps.

- **Sigmoidoscopy** where a thin, flexible tube is put into your rectum to let the doctor see inside the lower part of your colon.
- **Colonoscopy** where a thin, flexible tube is put into your rectum to let the doctor see the entire length of the colon.
- **Biopsy** where samples of tissue are removed for testing in a lab to check for cancer cells.
- **Blood tests** to check blood loss and how well the liver is working.

If a tumor is found, your doctor may order other tests to see if the cancer has spread to other parts of the body.

Treatment

After all of your tests are done, your doctor will talk with you about the results. If your tests show cancer, your doctor will talk to you about treatments that are best for you.

The most common treatments:

- **Surgery is done** to remove the tumor. The kind of surgery will depend on the location and size of the tumor. Often, the part of the colon with cancer is removed.
- **Radiation therapy** is used to stop or slow the growth of cancer. It is often used after surgery to destroy any cancer cells that may remain.
- **Chemotherapy** uses medicines to kill cancer cells. These medicines are given by mouth, by injection into a muscle or vein, or directly into the affected organ to help kill cancer cells.

You may have one or more cancer treatments. Some patients have surgery followed by radiation therapy or chemotherapy.

Other drug treatments that may be used in certain cases include:

- **Immunotherapy**, also called biotherapy, uses natural substances made by the body's immune system. These may kill cancer cells, slow their growth, or help your immune system fight the cancer in a better way.
- **Targeted therapy** uses drugs to find and attack cancer cells without harming normal cells.

Follow up care

Regular visits with your doctor are important.

During your treatment, your visits may include blood tests, x-rays and other tests. Report any problems to your doctor between visits.

After your cancer treatment, your visits may include other tests to watch for changes in your health.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns.