

## What Is Colorectal Cancer?

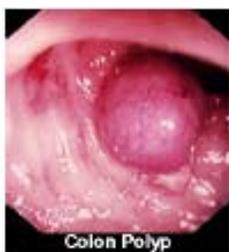
**Colorectal cancer is often called colon cancer. It is a common health problem in our community.** In the United States, it kills more people than any other type of cancer except lung cancer. About 55,000 Americans die from colorectal cancer each year.



**Colorectal cancer affects the “large intestine”** which is part of the body’s digestive system. The digestive system breaks down food so the body can use it for energy and for living. In the stomach food is broken down and then goes into the small intestine. This is where the nutrients of the food are taken into your

body. The material that remains goes into the first part of the large intestine (colon) where water is removed and it becomes more solid. It then goes into the last part of the large intestine (rectum) and passes out of your body as stool (also called bowel movements or feces). In the large intestine, the first part is called the “colon”, the section shaped like an “S” is called the “sigmoid colon”, and the last section is called the “rectum”.

**Colorectal cancer is a problem with “cells” in the large intestine.** Our bodies are made up of



billions of tiny cells. Cells are the basic unit of life. Cells are the simplest units capable of basic life functions. In their own way, cells eat, produce waste and reproduce. All living things are composed of cells, including flowers, animals and

people. Cells are very busy working in our bodies; they do thousands of functions each minute. Human cells are so small you need a microscope to see them. 10,000 cells can fit on the head of a pin! Although small, they contain very complicated structures inside that control their activities. There are over 200 different kinds of cells in our bodies: for example, blood, skin and muscle cells. Normal cells grow and make more cells when needed. This keeps the body healthy and working properly. Sometimes, things go wrong and new cells are made that are not needed. These extra cells can form a growth called a “tumor” or “polyp”.

**Colorectal polyps are common in people over age 50.** About 4 out of 10 people over age 50 have them. Some polyps are cancer. This means that the polyps

can invade other body parts and can be dangerous and difficult to treat.

**Fortunately, most polyps are not cancer.** The extra cells may grow larger, but they do not spread to other body parts. A small number of polyps (5 to 10 percent) will become cancer if they are not removed early. But, doctors cannot tell which polyps will become cancer and which won’t. So to be safe and prevent colorectal cancer it is better to find and remove polyps. Cancer is not contagious. You cannot catch it from someone who has it. You cannot get sick if you are near someone with cancer or come into contact with their symptoms.

**Usually, polyps and early colorectal cancer don’t cause you to have any noticeable changes in your body.**

Later, as colorectal cancer grows, people may notice some problems, or symptoms, like:

- Blood in or on your stools
- Going back and forth between hard stool (constipation) and loose stools (diarrhea)
- Very thin or narrow stools
- Feeling bloated or gassy
- Stomach pains
- Vomiting
- Losing weight without trying
- Or feeling tired all the time.

These problems or symptoms may be caused by colorectal cancer or other problems. Check with a doctor if you notice any of them.

**Without symptoms, the only way to find polyps or colorectal cancer is to be tested.** If polyps or cancer are found they are usually removed. If they are cancer then the treatment may also include radiation, chemotherapy or other medicines.

Talk to your doctor about the tests that find polyps early. When they are found early, they are easier to treat.

**Things you can do to prevent colorectal cancer are eating fruits and vegetables everyday and exercising often.**

Thank you for learning about colorectal cancer to keep yourself and family healthy!



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