Colorectal Cancer Information Sheet

What is Colorectal Cancer? Cancer that occurs in the colon or rectum (large intestine). It normally begins with polyps, which are non-cancerous mushroom-like growths that can turn into cancer if they are not removed (1).

Facts:

- The earlier colorectal cancer is found, the better the chances of successful treatment (1, 2, 3).
- You can have polyps or cancer in the colon or rectum without any symptoms (1).
- Women are just as likely as men to develop colorectal cancer (1, 2, 3).
- 1 out of 17 people of all ethnic groups will get colorectal cancer (2).
- It is one of the ***most commonly occurring cancers*** in *almost all* ***Asian*** *groups* for both men and women (1, 2).
- More people die from colon cancer each year than from breast cancer, prostate cancer, or AIDS (2, 3)
- 2 out of 3 colon cancer deaths could be prevented with routine testing (1, 2, 3).
- The majority of people with polyps or colorectal cancer do not have any symptoms! The only way to find polyps or colorectal cancer is through screening tests for this disease.

Who is at risk?

- All people over the age of 45 (1, 2, 3).
- Anyone with a family or personal history of colorectal cancer and/or inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), such as Crohn's disease or Ulcerative Colitis.
- Personal or family history of polyps in the colon (1, 2, 3).
- Persons with low exercise levels and a diet that is high in fat and low in fiber (2)

Signs and symptoms (1, 2, 3)

A) Early colorectal cancer: NONE – can only be detected through screening tests

B) Advanced colorectal cancer:

- Change in bowel habits: diarrhea or constipation, blood in stool, rectal bleeding, stools that are more narrow than normal
- Frequent stomach gas pain, unexplained weight loss, constant tiredness, unexplained anemia (low number of red blood cells).
- Many of these symptoms can be caused by other problems, but you should GO SEE A DOCTOR if you have any of these symptoms.

How do you prevent colorectal cancer (4)?

- Get regular screening tests beginning at age 45
- Eat less red meat and eat more vegetables
- Be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day and maintain a healthy weight
- Limit alcohol intake

Screening Guidelines:

- Screening should begin in all people at age 45. If you are at higher risk, screening should begin at age 40. Screening tests may include:
- The American Cancer Society (2) recommends one of the following screening options for people with average risk beginning at age 45:
  1. Yearly stool blood test + sigmoidoscopy every 3-5 years **OR**
  2. Colonoscopy every 10 years **OR**
  3. Double contrast barium enema every 5-10 years
- A low fat/high fiber diet and regular exercise might be protective, but screening guidelines should still be followed since everyone is at risk, especially with advancing age

Descriptions of Tests (1):

Stool blood test ("fecal occult blood test"): *Used to find blood in the stool that cannot normally be seen. People having this test receive a kit with instructions to take the test at home. The kit is sent to the laboratory for testing.*

Sigmoidoscopy: *A thin tube is inserted into the rectum. A small camera is attached outside the body and allows the doctor to look inside the rectum and the last part of the colon for polyps or cancer.*

Colonoscopy: *A longer tube is inserted into the rectum. It is connected to a video camera so the doctor can look for polyps or cancer in the entire colon. Polyps can be removed by small clippers at the end of the tube and sent to the laboratory to see if cancer is present.*

Double-Contrast Barium Enema: *A liquid is inserted into the colon and air is added to expand the colon. Then an x-ray is taken of the colon.*

Digital Rectal Examination: *The doctor inserts a gloved finger into the rectum to feel for any abnormal growths in the rectal area. This test can be done at a regular doctor's visit.*

References:

1) American Gastroenterological Association (http://www.gastro.org/public/drdan-colc.html)
2) American Cancer Society – Colon and Rectum Cancer Resource Center (www.cancer.org)
3) National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service (http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov)
4) Harvard Center for Cancer Prevention (www.yourcancerrisk.harvard.edu)

Other Colon Cancer Resources

- Cancer Information Service (800)4-CANCER, a program of the National Cancer Institute
- American Cancer Society (800)ACS-2345