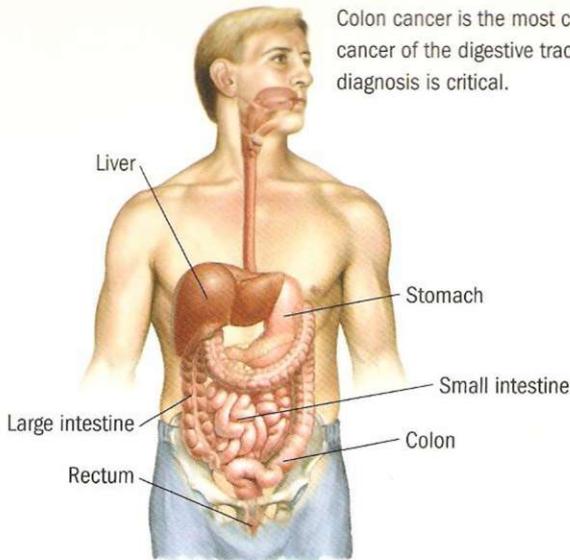


COLON CANCER SCREENING AND PREVENTION

F. Netter M.D.

Colon cancer is the most common cancer of the digestive tract. Early diagnosis is critical.



What Is the Colon?

The colon is part of the digestive system. Food moves from the mouth to the stomach. Several hours later, it moves into the intestines, first the small intestine and then the large intestine. After digestion of food is finished, what's left leaves the body as waste (stool) through the rectum. The colon is the last part of the large intestine, just before the rectum.

What Is Colon Cancer?

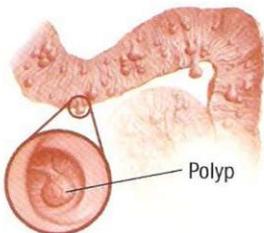
Colon cancer is a tumor in the colon. It is the most common cancer of the digestive tract. Other names are adenocarcinoma of the colon and colorectal cancer (often the lower rectum and sigmoid part of the colon are involved). The cancer can also be found in the first part of the colon (cecum). Colon cancer can also spread (metastasize) to other parts of the body.

Colon cancer usually starts as a small growth (polyp) on the surface of the colon. Some polyps are harmless, but some can turn into cancer.

Change in bowel habits, stool appearance, or pain may be the first symptoms of colon cancer, but sometimes there are no symptoms.



Chronic low-grade bleeding may lead to anemia (low blood).



Polyp

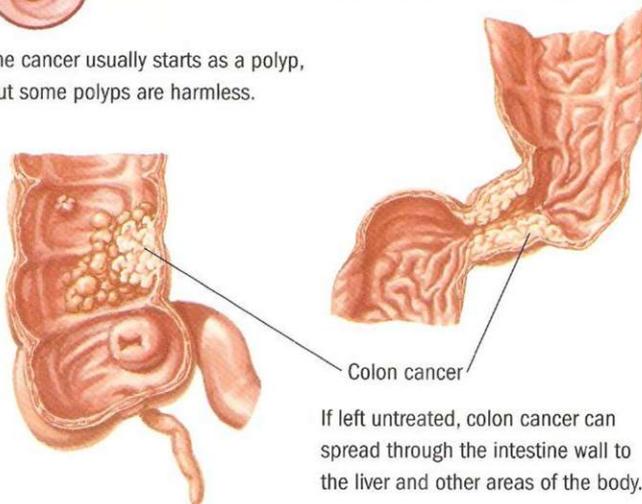
The cancer usually starts as a polyp, but some polyps are harmless.

What Are Symptoms of Colon Cancer?

Symptoms to be aware of are a change in bowel habits, such as constipation or diarrhea, a change in stool size (e.g., pencil-thin) or stool appearance (e.g., black and tarry), rectal bleeding, and abdominal pain.

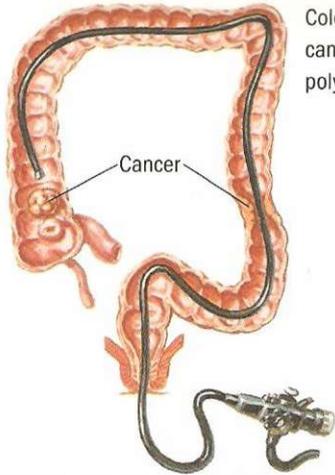
Sometimes no symptoms are present, but iron deficiency anemia from long-term blood loss may occur.

Early diagnosis is critical because undetected or untreated cancer usually spreads through the intestine wall into neighboring areas and into the liver. Sometimes it can also spread to lungs and bones.

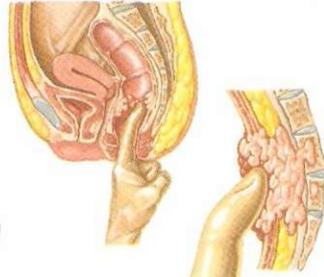


Colon cancer

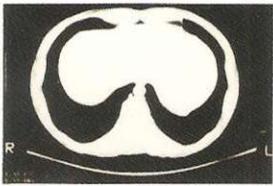
If left untreated, colon cancer can spread through the intestine wall to the liver and other areas of the body.



Colonoscopy is used to detect cancer as well as precancerous polyps.



Tumors near the rectum can be found with a rectal exam.



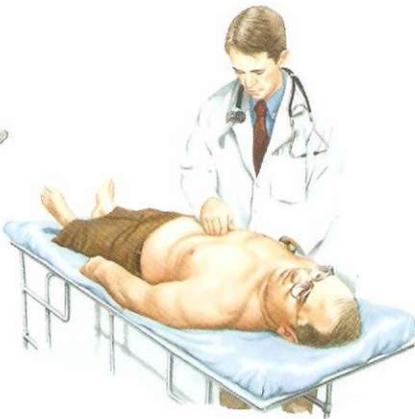
CT imaging can sometimes reveal polyps. CT is also used to see if cancer has spread beyond the colon.



To reduce the risk of developing colon cancer, eat a high-fiber diet and exercise.



Get an annual physical including a rectal exam if you are over 50 or in a higher risk group. Discuss screening colonoscopy with your doctor.



How Is Colon Cancer Diagnosed?

The doctor will do a complete physical examination, including a digital rectal examination (DRE), and take one or more stool samples. These samples are analyzed for any occult (hidden) blood. This testing can find bleeding in the intestine, but results can be inaccurate because certain medicines or red meat may produce positive results that are really normal (false-positive results).

The doctor also looks inside the colon with a flexible tube called a colonoscope. This scope is passed through the rectum to see the whole colon. The doctor can see problem areas and biopsy (take samples of) these areas and remove any polyps. The samples are studied under a microscope to look for cancerous cells. Other tests, such as computed tomography (CT), of the abdomen and pelvis may be done to see whether cancer has moved to other parts of the body.

A newer screening test involves using CT only for the intestine (CT colonography). This test is also called virtual colonoscopy. Any possible problem areas found by CT colonography will need a follow-up colonoscopy to see whether they are cancerous.

DOs and DON'Ts in Diagnosing and Preventing Colon Cancer:

- ✓ **DO** realize the importance of colon screening for everyone, starting at age 50 or earlier for people who have family members with colon cancer.
- ✓ **DO** follow your doctor's advice.
- ✓ **DO** eat a high-fiber diet.
- ✓ **DO** watch your weight.
- ✓ **DO** exercise. Exercising can improve your overall health.
- ⊗ **DON'T** forget the importance of screening.
- ⊗ **DON'T** smoke.

FROM THE DESK OF

NOTES

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

Colon Cancer Alliance
 Tel: (877) 422-2030
 Web: www.ccalliance.org
 American Cancer Society
 Tel: (800) ACS-2345
 Web: www.cancer.org