

Colorectal Cancer

What is colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the colon or rectum and is the second leading cause of cancer death in the United States. When colorectal cancer is detected in its early stages, it can be successfully treated and often cured.

All men and women are at risk for colorectal cancer, though some people are at higher risk for the disease because of age, lifestyle or personal and family medical history. Starting at age 50, men and women should begin routine screening tests.

Diagnosing colorectal cancer

Screening tests are generally used to detect abnormalities in the colon. If the physician detects any abnormalities during the screening process, further tests may be suggested. These tests include the following:

- Colonoscopy – A thin, lighted instrument is used to view the inside of the rectum and colon.
- Barium Enema – An X-ray of the colon to detect abnormalities. Liquid barium (in the form of an enema) is inserted in to the rectum and colon in order for the images to be clearer and more distinct during the X-ray.
- Fecal Occult Blood Test – Stool samples are tested to determine if abnormalities in the colon and rectum might be cancerous.

If the tests show an abnormality, a sample of tissue, known as a biopsy may be ordered to check the tissue for cancer cells.

Symptoms

While colorectal cancer often develops with no symptoms, there are several noticeable signs that can occur in the advanced stages of the disease.

- Rectal bleeding
- Blood in or on the stool
- Change in bowel habits
- Stools that are narrower than usual
- General stomach discomfort (bloating, fullness and/or cramps)
- Diarrhea, constipation or feeling that the bowel does not empty completely
- Frequent gas pains
- Weight loss for no apparent reason
- Vomiting

Anyone with these symptoms for more than two weeks should see a doctor.

Treating colorectal cancer

If the tests determine the abnormality is a polyp, a simple surgical procedure can remove the polyp. If the tests indicate the abnormality is cancer, different treatment options may be suggested, based on the location and size of the cancer. Suggested treatments may include the following

- Surgery
- Radiation Therapy
- Chemotherapy

To find out more, contact Markey Cancer Center at (895) 257-4488 or www.mc.uky.edu/markey.

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