

COLON CANCER



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Just hearing the word cancer is scary. It makes people think of a long illness, hospital visits and more. But talking about cancer doesn't have to be difficult.

Colon cancer is 90% preventable if detected early. In 2011, approximately 22,200 people in Canada were diagnosed with this disease and 8,900 lost their lives. In fact, it's the third most common cancer and the second most common cause of death from cancer for both men and women.

But if the vast majority of cases are preventable, why is this rate so high? According to Colon Cancer Canada, many of the people who are diagnosed find out too late.

The majority of colorectal cancers begin as benign growths in the lining of the colon called adenomatous polyps. Over many years, these polyps grow in

size and number, which increases the risk that the cells in the polyps will become cancerous. Removing these growths early on, which is done easily during a colonoscopy, will prevent colon cancer from developing.

Being a little scared to have a colonoscopy is understandable. But a colonoscopy is one of the best ways to screen for polyps in the bowel. It is the screening method for colon cancer rated above any other method by many organizations.¹

Colonoscopies provide the most thorough view of the colon in its entirety and have a high detection rate for polyps. The doctor can also remove polyps and take samples of abnormal areas during the colonoscopy procedure. Although many people get nervous at just the thought of this procedure, it is quick, painless, safe and the patient is sedated.

Because a colonoscopy easily removes these growths – sometimes in as little as 20 minutes – before they become cancerous, colon cancer is one of the most preventable cancers in the world.

Who is at risk for developing colon cancer? There is no single cause for this disease, but some people are at a greater risk:

- People with a family history of colon cancer. If you have an immediate blood relative (parent, sibling, aunt, uncle, grandparent) with the disease, you should get tested 10 years before his/her age of diagnosis. For example, if he/she was diagnosed at 48, you should begin screening tests when you are 38 years old.
- People who have already been diagnosed with polyps.



¹ As rated by the American Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE), the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA), the American College of Gastroenterology (ACG) and the American Cancer Society (ACS).

PREVENTATIVE STEPS TO TAKE

- People with inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease).
- People with a family history of inherited breast, uterine or ovarian cancer.
- Middle-aged people, 50 years and over.

Because so many factors related to colon cancer are hereditary or fixed, such as age and family history, a person can feel powerless to avoid developing this cancer.

The Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada lists the following as lifestyle-related factors that can be altered:

Diet

Colorectal cancer appears to be associated with diets that are high in fat and calories, red and processed meats and low in fiber, vegetables and fruits.

Sedentary Lifestyle/Physical Inactivity

If you are inactive, you are more likely to develop colon cancer. This may be because when you are inactive, waste has a tendency to stay in your colon longer. Regular physical activity may reduce your risk by stimulating the movement of your colon and the passage of waste through the colon.

Type II Diabetes

People with Type 2 (usually non-insulin dependent) diabetes may have an increased risk of developing colorectal cancer. Both Type 2 diabetes and colorectal cancer share some of the same risk factors (such as excess weight). But even after taking these into account, people with Type 2 diabetes still have an increased risk.

Obesity

People who are obese have an increased risk of colon cancer and an increased risk of dying of colon cancer when compared with people considered 'normal' weight.

Smoking

Long-term smokers are more likely than non-smokers to develop and die from colorectal cancer. While smoking is a well-known cause of lung cancer, some of the cancer-causing substances are swallowed and can cause digestive system cancers, such as colorectal cancer.

Severe Alcoholic Consumption

Colorectal cancer has been linked to the heavy use of alcohol. At least some of this may be due to the fact that heavy alcohol users tend to have low levels of folic acid in the body. Still, alcohol use should be limited to no more than two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women.

Always consult your doctor if you have concerns or questions.

- Fewer than 1/3 of people over the age of 50 have been screened for colorectal cancer in the past two years.
- Yet people who are diagnosed at early stages have more than a 90% chance of being survival.
- People with advanced stages of colorectal cancer have a lower chance of a cure; less than 10% will be alive five years after the diagnosis.

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Source: Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada, Colon Cancer Canada, American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy

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