

Understanding Rectal Cancer: Causes, Symptoms, and Prevention

Rectal cancer, also known as colorectal cancer when it affects both the colon and rectum, is one of the most common types of cancer worldwide. Early detection and prevention play a critical role in improving outcomes and saving lives. This blog explores the causes, symptoms, and available treatments for colon cancer, as well as actionable steps to reduce your risk.

What is Colon Cancer?

Colon cancer begins in the large intestine (colon), the final part of the digestive system, and typically develops from small, non-cancerous growths called polyps. Over time, some polyps can become cancerous, invading the walls of the colon and potentially spreading to other parts of the body.

Colon cancer affects both men and women, most commonly appearing after age 50. However, cases in younger individuals are rising, highlighting the importance of awareness and early screening.

Causes and Risk Factors

While the exact cause of colon cancer isn't always clear, several factors can increase the risk:

1. **Age:** Most cases occur in people over 50, although younger adults can also be affected.
 2. **Family History:** A history of colon cancer or polyps in close relatives increases risk.
 3. **Inherited Conditions:** Genetic syndromes like Lynch syndrome or familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) significantly raise the likelihood of developing colon cancer.
 4. **Lifestyle Factors:**
 - Diets high in red or processed meats.
 - Low intake of fiber, fruits, and vegetables.
 - Physical inactivity.
 - Obesity.
 - Smoking and heavy alcohol consumption.
 5. **Chronic Conditions:** Inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD) like Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis can heighten the risk.
-

Symptoms of Rectal Cancer

Early-stage Rectal cancer often causes no symptoms, which is why regular screening is so important. As the cancer progresses, symptoms may include:

- **Changes in Bowel Habits:** Persistent diarrhea, constipation, or narrow stools lasting more than a few days.
- **Rectal Bleeding:** Bright red or dark blood in the stool.
- **Abdominal Pain or Cramping:** Persistent discomfort or bloating.
- **Unexplained Weight Loss:** A common symptom of advanced cancer.
- **Fatigue and Weakness:** Often due to anemia from chronic blood loss.
- **Feeling of Incomplete Bowel Movements:** Even after a bowel movement.

If you experience any of these symptoms, consult a healthcare provider promptly.

Screening and Diagnosis

Screening tests can detect colon and rectal cancer early, often before symptoms develop, improving the chances of successful treatment. Common screening methods include:

1. **Colonoscopy:**
 - A flexible tube with a camera examines the colon and removes polyps if found.
2. **Fecal Immunochemical Test (FIT):**
 - Detects hidden blood in the stool, which may indicate cancer.
3. **Stool DNA Test:**
 - Looks for genetic changes associated with colon cancer in stool samples.
4. **CT Colonography:**
 - A less invasive imaging test to evaluate the colon.
5. **Sigmoidoscopy:**
 - Similar to a colonoscopy but focuses on the lower part of the colon.

Screening recommendations typically begin at age 45 for most individuals, but those with higher risk factors may need earlier or more frequent testing.

Staging Rectal Cancer

Staging of rectal cancer is very important. It helps identify the extent of the disease. Staging requires multiple steps

1. **Computed Tomography Imaging:** is often used to evaluate the chest, abdomen, and pelvis to assess the spread of disease, such as metastatic disease.
2. **MRI pelvis:** helps stage the cancer accurately
3. **Tumor Markers:** Blood test for Carcinoembryonic Antigen (CEA) specific to Colon Cancer

4. **Endoscopic evaluation:** A colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy is performed to identify the extent of disease within the colon. It also helps rule out simultaneous colon cancer. This also helps mark or Tattoo in the rectum from the inside to allow the surgeon identify it externally.
-

Treatment Options

Rectal cancer treatment depends on the disease's stage, overall health, and patient preferences. Common treatment options include:

1. Surgery

- **Polypectomy:** Removal of polyps during a colonoscopy for early-stage cancer.
- **Robotic Low anterior resection:** Removal of the cancerous portion of the colon and surrounding tissue. The colon is then re-attached to establish Gastrointestinal continuity

2. Radiation Therapy

- Used to shrink tumors or kill cancer cells, often in rectal cancer cases.

3. Chemotherapy

- Drugs are used to destroy cancer cells, typically for advanced cancer or after surgery to prevent recurrence.

4. Targeted Therapy

- Medications that specifically target cancer cell growth, such as monoclonal antibodies.

5. Immunotherapy

- Helps the immune system recognize and attack cancer cells, particularly in cases with specific genetic markers.
-

Prevention of Rectal Cancer

While some risk factors like age and genetics are beyond control, many lifestyle changes can help reduce the risk of colon cancer:

1. **Adopt a Healthy Diet:**
 - Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.
 - Limit red and processed meats.
 2. **Stay Physically Active:**
 - Engage in regular exercise to maintain a healthy weight and reduce inflammation.
 3. **Avoid Tobacco and Limit Alcohol:**
 - Both increase the risk of various cancers, including colon cancer.
 4. **Get Regular Screenings:**
 - Early detection is key to preventing the progression of colon cancer.
 5. **Manage Chronic Conditions:**
 - If you have IBD or a family history of colon cancer, work closely with your healthcare provider.
-

Living with Rectal Cancer

A Rectal cancer diagnosis can be life-changing, but with advances in treatment and support, many people live long, fulfilling lives. Key strategies include:

- **Building a Support Network:** Friends, family, and support groups can provide emotional and practical help.
 - **Staying Informed:** Learn about your condition and treatment options to make empowered decisions.
 - **Maintaining Follow-Up Care:** Regular check-ups are crucial for monitoring your health and catching any recurrences early.
-

Final Thoughts

Rectal cancer is a preventable and treatable disease when caught early. Awareness of risk factors, symptoms, and the importance of regular screenings can save lives. By adopting healthy lifestyle habits and staying proactive about your health, you can significantly reduce your risk.

If you or a loved one are due for a colon cancer screening, don't wait—talk to your healthcare provider today. Early detection is the key to beating colon cancer.