

The National Black Leadership Initiative on Cancer III: Community Networks Program

Colorectal Cancer Fact Sheet

Colorectal cancer is a term used to refer to cancer that starts in the colon or rectum. The colon and the rectum are parts of the *digestive system*. Together, they form a long muscular tube called the large *intestine* (also called the large bowel).

What Everyone Should Know about Colorectal cancer:

- The incidence is higher in men than in women.
- Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer among men and women (lung Cancer is #1).
- Colorectal cancer is decreasing due to improved screening and early detection.

Risk Factors:

- **Polyps** - The vast majority of colorectal cancers develop in polyps. They are benign but they may become cancerous over time. Removing polyps is an important way to prevent colorectal cancer.
- **Age** - Colorectal cancers most often occur in people over the age of 50 and the risk increases as people get older.
- **Personal History** – New cancer can develop in other areas of the colon and rectum.
- **Family History** - Close relatives of a person who has had colorectal cancer have a higher than average risk of developing the disease.
- **Familial Polyposis** - This is an inherited condition in which hundreds of polyps develop in the colon and rectum. Over time these polyps can become cancerous.
- **Diet** - The risk of developing colon cancer seems to be higher in people whose diet is high in total fat, protein, calories and alcohol; and low in calcium, dietary fiber, particularly that derived from vegetables.
- **Ulcerative colitis or Crohn's** - These diseases cause inflammation of the lining of the colon. The risk of colon cancer is much greater than average for people who have these diseases and it increases with the length of time they have had it.
- **Physical Activity and Obesity** – These put a person at higher risk for colorectal cancer.
- **Smoking** - Smoking not only causes lung cancer, but recent studies show that smokers are 30% to 40% more likely than nonsmokers to die of colorectal cancer.
- **Race** - African Americans are at higher risk of getting this cancer and dying from it. The reason for this is not known.

Recognizing Signs and Symptoms:

There may be no symptoms with colorectal cancer. Warning signs to watch for may include:

- A change in bowel habits
- Blood in or on the stool (either bright red or very dark in color)
- Stools that are narrower than usual
- Rectal bleeding
- Feeling that bowel does not empty completely
- Weight loss with no known reason

GUIDELINES FOR EARLY DETECTION

The National Black Leadership Initiative on Cancer III suggests that screening of asymptomatic individuals 50 and over with the following guidelines can detect a high percentage of early cancers:

- **Digital Rectal Examination** - During regular check ups, have a digital rectal exam. The doctor inserts a lubricated-gloved finger into the rectum and feels for abnormal areas.
- **Fecal Occult Blood Test** - Beginning at age 50, have a fecal occult blood test (FOBT) every year. This test checks for hidden blood in the stool. A newer kind of stool blood test is known as FIT (fecal immunochemical test). It is very much like the FOBT but is perhaps a little easier to do and it gives a fewer number of false positive results. If it is positive, further tests will be done.
- **Sigmoidoscopy** - Beginning at age 50, have this exam every three to five years. The doctor looks through a thin-lighted tube, to check for polyps, tumors or other abnormalities.
- **Colonoscopy**- A colonoscopy is a longer version of the sigmoidoscopy. It allows the doctor to see the entire colon. If a polyp is found, the doctor may remove it during the test. If anything else looks abnormal, a biopsy might be done at the same time.

For more information about colorectal cancer, ask your doctor, call the Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER, your local health department or the American Cancer Society. For more information about the National Black Leadership Initiative on Cancer III, call 1-800-724-1185.

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