

Could YOU have Colon Cancer?

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Colorectal cancer (CRC) is a common and lethal disease. Many people are unaware of the danger until symptoms show up. When this happens, the disease has progressed to a point where treatment is more difficult. As scary as this sounds, colon cancer remains treatable when caught early, thanks to a powerful screening tool – the colonoscopy. Removal of polyps during the time of the colonoscopy can prevent colon cancer and CRC-related death.

In the United States, CRC is the second leading cause of cancer death and accounted for approximately 50,000 deaths in 2013. Approximately one in three people who develop CRC die of this disease.

Screening rates for CRC, although rising in the United States over the past few years, are generally below national targets. In 2012 in the U.S., only 65.1% of adults between ages 50 and 75 years were up-to-date with CRC screening and 27.7% had never been screened.

RISK FACTORS

There are some commonly acknowledged risk factors that increase a person's likelihood of contracting colon cancer. These include the following:

1. A personal or family history of colon cancer or polyps
2. Race (risk increased in African Americans)
3. Inflammatory Bowel Disease (Crohn's disease or Ulcerative Colitis)
4. Obesity
5. Cigarette smoking
6. Lack of physical activity
7. Alcohol Abuse
8. Diabetes
9. Diet low in fruits/vegetables or high in red meat

SYMPTOMS

While advanced polyps can appear in people without symptoms, there are some warning signs that can indicate when it's time to see your doctor. Possible symptoms include the following:

1. Blood in stool
2. Anemia
3. Change in bowel habits
4. Unexplained weight loss
5. Abdominal pain

WHEN SHOULD YOU GET SCREENED?

Because the risk of colon cancer increases with age, people age 50 or older should have periodic screening for early detection of polyps and colon cancer. As the risk is increased for African Americans, colon cancer screening should start at age 45.

There are many ways to screen for colon cancers, but if any of the tests come back positive, a colonoscopy needs to be done. If a polyp is not removed, it will continue to grow larger. It usually takes several years for a polyp to change to cancer.

PROGNOSIS

For people who catch and treat colon cancer early, the 5 year survival rate is over 80%. If the cancer has reached the lymph nodes, the chance of survival drops to 65%. When the cancer has spread to distant parts of the body, like the liver or bones, the likelihood of living more than 5 years drops to about 10%.

So don't miss your colonoscopy! It just may save your life. ■