

KNOW YOUR BODY

Colon Cancer

Colon cancer is different from many other cancers: It's not only preventable – it's treatable, especially when caught early. And thanks to advances in detection and treatment, the majority of patients diagnosed with colon cancer go on to live normal lives.

New, minimally invasive surgical techniques mean patients have more options for removing the cancer, resulting in a faster recovery. And some patients may benefit from the latest chemotherapy drugs that kill cancer cells, as well as targeted therapies to slow cancer cell growth. Genetic studies can also help patients make more well-informed decisions about their treatment.

Receiving a colon cancer diagnosis is frightening; but the first step to recovery is understanding the disease, and coming up with a plan to fight it.

What Is Colon Cancer?

Colon cancer is a type of gastrointestinal cancer that begins in the lower part of the digestive system (the colon). Because colon cancer is similar to rectal cancer, which occurs in the last several inches of the colon, these cancers are sometimes grouped together and called colorectal cancer.

Colon cancer begins when abnormal cells grow and divide inside the colon. As this process occurs, it can lead to the formation of a group of abnormal cells, or polyp, on the inner wall of the colon. A polyp is not cancer; but some polyps, called adenomas, can turn into cancer. If a polyp becomes cancerous, the cancer can stay contained within the colon or it may travel through blood vessels or lymph vessels to other parts of the body. If colon cancer spreads, it's typically to the liver, abdominal cavity, or lungs.

Risk Factors and Prevention

Like most cancers, colon cancer is more easily and successfully treated if detected early. That's why it's important to learn the risk factors and ways you can try to avoid it altogether.

Risks

Risk factors for colon cancer include:

- **Age:** Your chances of developing colon cancer increase significantly after age 50.
- **Colorectal polyps:** Someone who's had colon cancer or adenomatous (benign) polyps has a greater risk of developing colon cancer.
- **Family history:** People with a history of colon cancer in one or more first-degree relatives (parents, siblings, or children) are at increased risk. This could be due to inherited genes, shared environmental factors, or a combination of these.
- **Ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease:** Over time, these chronic inflammatory diseases of the colon can increase your risk of developing colon cancer.
- **Race:** African-Americans have a greater risk of colon cancer than people of other races.
- **Inherited syndromes:** Inherited gene defects (or mutations) can increase your risk of developing colon cancer. These include familial adenomatous polyposis and hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer, also known as Lynch syndrome. Genetic counselors can help patients identify their level of risk.
- **Diet:** A low-fiber, high-fat diet can increase your risk of developing colon cancer. Recent studies have found that people who eat a lot of red meat (like beef, pork, lamb, or liver) and processed meat (hot dogs and some lunch meats) are more likely to develop colon cancer.
- **Other lifestyle-related factors:** Smoking, heavy alcohol use, obesity, and physical inactivity have all been linked to colon cancer.

