

## The “bottom line” of colon cancer prevention

Besides the beginning of a beautiful spring, March is colon cancer awareness month. More and more we are considering colon cancer a preventable type of cancer. With proper diet, exercise, minimization of risk factors, regular checkups, and appropriate screening exams – your risk of colon cancer can be minimized or avoided altogether.

Colon cancer results from uncontrolled cell growth that usually starts in the wall of the large intestine (colon), lower in the rectum, or even the appendix, which protrudes off the first part of the colon called the cecum. If you have a primary relative (parent, sibling, or child) that has colon cancer, your personal risk is increased by a factor of 2 or 3.

You are also more at risk if you have inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) such as Crohn’s Disease or Ulcerative Colitis. Additional risk factors include older age, male gender, high intake of fat, consumption of alcohol and/or red meat, low fiber diet, obesity, smoking and a lack of physical exercise – so adjust these in your favor as much as possible!

Colon cancer is the third most commonly diagnosed cancer in the world, and the fourth most common cause of worldwide cancer death after lung, stomach, and liver cancers. It is more common in developed countries – most likely due to diets containing more processed foods, fats, and less fiber. It is currently thought that most of these cancers initially begin their course as small, pre-cancerous polyps on the wall of the colon or rectum. Over time (10 to 15 years), and with certain changes, these polyps may undergo mutation into malignant tumors which will then, through the process of uncontrolled growth, become invasive and can actually penetrate through the colon and invade nearby tissue or other organs – which then becomes *metastatic* colon cancer.

Common symptoms most often include some blood in the stool, vague abdominal pain, anemia, worsening constipation or decreased caliber of the stool, and can be accompanied by unexplained fevers, weight loss, and night sweats. If you have any of these symptoms, please consult your health care provider.

We find that the diagnosis is more commonly made in the 7<sup>th</sup> decade of life (in your 60’s). Because of that factor, we believe it is best to start screening at age 50. So, when you turn the big Five-O, your birthday present from the house of medicine is a colonoscopy, and please don’t put this off. It is an easy outpatient procedure that may just save your life. If you had a primary relative with colon cancer, you need to get your initial screening colonoscopy at age 40 just to be on the safe side.

So, in summary, eat a healthy diet, including high fiber and low fat (always good advice), get regular exercise, limit risk factors for colon cancer that are under your control, and get regular checkups including a screening colonoscopy when you are due. That is the “bottom line” on how to prevent colon cancer!