



Prevention of Colon Cancer

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Abstract

Colon cancer, or colorectal cancer if it occurs in both the colon and the rectum, is one of the more prevalent cancers in the world. It occurs when abnormal cells of the colon (large intestine) multiply abnormally and become tumor cells. These tumors may grow into neighboring tissues, and can spread to distant organs via the bloodstream or lymph glands if untreated. Although serious, colon cancer is one of the most preventable cancers as it typically takes several years to develop and can be detected and treated early. The colon is an essential part of the digestive system. It absorbs water and electrolytes, processes waste and forms stool before it is excreted. Colon health is important to overall health, so it is important to create habits that help keep the organ healthy.

Introduction - Understanding Colon Cancer

Colon cancer, or colorectal cancer if it occurs in both the colon and the rectum, is one of the more prevalent cancers in the world. It occurs when abnormal cells of the colon (large intestine) multiply abnormally and become tumor cells. These tumors may grow into neighboring tissues, and can spread to distant organs via the bloodstream or lymph glands if untreated. Although serious, colon cancer is one of the most preventable cancers as it typically takes several years to develop and can be detected and treated early. The colon is an essential part of the digestive system. It absorbs water and electrolytes, processes waste and forms stool before it is excreted. Colon health is important to overall health, so it is important to create habits that help keep the organ healthy.

There are a number of factors that affect the risk of colon cancer. There are some risk factors that cannot be changed age and inherited genetic disorders. But there are many factors that can be changed, such as unhealthy eating habits, obesity, inactivity, smoking, drinking too much alcohol and not managing chronic conditions well. A healthy lifestyle is known to have a dramatic impact on the risk of colon cancer, with research consistently showing that certain lifestyle changes can make a significant difference. Another key to prevention is screening. There are small, noncancerous growths in the colon that over time may give rise to colon cancer (polyps). Screening tests can help health care providers find and remove these polyps before they turn cancerous, greatly reducing the risk of disease.

This paper discusses evidence for colon cancer prevention. Readers will discover how nutrition, exercise, weight management, screening, family history and healthy daily behaviors all play a role in reducing risk. With this knowledge and some of these tips in their daily routines, people can make a significant difference in safeguarding their digestive health and consequently their quality of life.

What Is Colon Cancer? Causes and Risk Factors

Colon cancer starts when there are changes in the genes of cells in the lining of the colons. These mutations make the cells grow and divide, rather than following the body's normal growth and repair processes. With time, polyps are formed by group of abnormal cells and some of these may develop into cancer if not excised.

Colon cancer typically takes a long time to develop, 10 years or more. This gradual development makes it important to prevent and detect the condition early. When precancerous growths (polyps) are removed, the disease process is halted before the cancer develops.

One of the best risk factors is age. The incidence is highest in adults over age 50 years of age, but has risen in younger adults in the past few decades. People who develop inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) like ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease are at an increased risk of developing it throughout their lives because chronic inflammation can cause damage to the intestinal lining.

Family history also is significant. A genetic mutation that makes individuals susceptible to colon cancer may be passed down from a parent, sibling or child who is diagnosed with colon cancer, especially if the child is diagnosed at an early age. There are also other syndromes including Lynch and familial adenomatous polyposis which significantly increase the lifetime risk, and which need special screening programmes.

Lifestyle factors have a great impact on the risk of colon cancer. High intakes of processed meats, red meats, refined carbohydrates and saturated fats have been linked to a higher risk, and high intakes of fibre, fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains seem to help prevent it. Other risk factors are obesity, lack of exercise, smoking and excessive drinking. Knowing these risk factors, people can make good choices. While it is impossible to remove all risk factors, it is possible to reduce the risk of colon cancer by dealing with modifiable risk factors and seeking out recommended screening.

The Importance of Prevention

Colon cancer is easier to prevent than to treat the advanced disease. Although medical advances have helped to increase survival rates, prevention is the most important, least expensive, and safest method to decreasing illness and mortality. A special characteristic of colon cancer is the amount of time that it takes to develop. The majority of cancers develop from adenomatous polyps, which over a number of years are turned into malignant tumours. Healthcare providers can find and remove polyps before they become harmful during this longer time period. There is perhaps no other cancer with such a great potential for prevention.

Primary Prevention is the approach which aims to reduce risk factors before the onset of disease. Eating healthy foods, keeping a healthy weight, exercising regularly, not smoking and reducing alcohol consumption all help to reduce the risk of colon cancer. The same behaviors are also effective in helping to decrease the likelihood of developing heart disease, diabetes, and multiple other cancers, offering great returns in health.

Secondary prevention includes early detection of a disease, screening. The other tests, such as colonoscopy, stool tests, and others can detect abnormalities before they cause symptoms. Colon cancer often can be treated successfully when it's caught in the early stages, and this type of cancer has a much better prognosis than colon cancer that has metastasized outside the colon.

The awareness of the public also plays a part in preventing. Some people do not get screened because they don't like the idea of the test or think that they are not at risk. Educational programs inform people that screening can save lives, and that new screening methods are mostly safe and effective and that they are well tolerated.

Promoting preventive care is important for healthcare providers, community organizations and public health agencies. Implementing strategies that promote healthy lifestyles and increase access to screening services can help communities decrease the burden of colon cancer and boost population health. Finally, prevention allows people to take steps to protect themselves from harm by making choices, seeking care and adopting healthy habits for a lifetime.

Healthy Eating to Reduce Colon Cancer Risk

Good nutrition is a key factor in colon health. There is no doubt that nutrition is a major factor in inflammation, gut bacteria, digestion and cellular repair which all play a role in colon cancer. Many

protective nutrients are found in a plant-based diet. Fruits and vegetables are sources of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and phytochemicals which help prevent free radical damage to cells. Whole grains are a good source of dietary fibre, which is essential for proper digestion and regular bowel movements.

Fiber is an important consideration, since it can also help to shorten the amount of time waste spends in the colon and encourage good bacteria in the gut. In the process of fibre fermentation, intestinal bacteria generate short-chain fatty acids like butyrate that provide nourishment to cells in the colon and could help to reduce inflammation, and promote healthy cell growth.

Processed meats should be avoided, too. Bacon, sausage, hot dogs and deli meats are associated with higher colon cancer risk, in part due to preservatives and chemicals that are produced during processing. There has also been a link found between high red meat consumption, especially cooked at very high temperatures, and an increased risk.

There are great benefits to swapping out some of the not-so-great foods out there for some healthier options. Dr. Mahan says that opting for fish, poultry, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds over processed meats can help lower the intake of harmful compounds while providing high quality protein. Good fats, such as olive oil, avocados and nuts, are beneficial for general health. Hydration is also a key aspect of digestive health. Adequate hydration promotes regular bowel movements and helps to ensure that the digestive system is functioning properly. There's no need to be perfect in order to eat healthy. Making small changes in the diet, over many years, leads to significant decreases in disease risk. Along with exercise and screening, a balanced diet is one of the best defences against colon cancer.

The Role of Dietary Fiber, Fruits, and Vegetables

One of the most well researched nutrients in the prevention of colon cancer is dietary fibre. Fiber is unique as a carbohydrate because it does not get fully digested during its journey through the digestive system, offering multiple health benefits which can help maintain a healthy colon. Fiber helps to bulk up stools and helps them to pass through the intestines easily. The faster the movement, the less time that potentially harmful substances have to come in contact with the colon lining. Soluble fibre can also provide nourishment to healthy gut bacteria to contribute to a healthy gut.

The gut microbiome is made up of trillions of microorganisms that affect digestion, immune function and inflammation. High fibre diets promote good bacteria to grow and create compounds that help maintain healthy colon cells. Researchers are still finding other means by which the microbiome serves to protect from disease.

It's not just fibre that protects from fruits and vegetables. The colourful produce has antioxidants, including vitamin C, vitamin E, beta-carotene and all kinds of plant compounds, which all aid in neutralising harmful free radicals. These agents can decrease DNA damage which can lead to the formation of cancer cells. Folate, one of the B vitamins, is essential to DNA synthesis and repair, and is found in leafy green vegetables. Folate is needed for normal cell division and may play a role in preventing abnormal cell changes that lead to cancer. It is advised to have different kinds of fruits and vegetables throughout the day, and not rely on supplements. Whole foods contain the complex combination of nutrients which are more effective than individual vitamins.

Some ways to add more fibre are to use whole-grain bread rather than white bread, snack on fresh fruit, add beans to soups and salads, use vegetables in all meals, and use brown rice and oats in place of refined grains. Creating these habits early in life and sustaining them into adulthood can help with healthy digestion and can significantly lower the risk of colon cancer for life.

Physical Activity and Maintaining a Healthy Weight

One of the best ways to lower the risk of colon cancer is through regular exercise. The benefits of exercise on the body are many and encompass better digestion, hormonal control, anti-inflammatory action, boosting immunity and the maintenance of a healthy body weight. Studies also indicate that active people are less likely to develop colon cancer than sedentary people. Exercise stimulates normal bowel function,

reducing the amount of time waste remains in the colon. It also helps to increase insulin sensitivity and reduce insulin levels in the blood stream, which can have an impact on cancer development.

It's important to keep a healthy weight as well. Extra weight, especially in the belly, can lead to low-grade inflammation and hormone imbalances that can lead to abnormal cell growth. The obesity has been recognized as a risk factor for colon cancer, particularly for men, but women are also at risk. Moderate-intensity aerobic activity refers to any activity that raises your breathing rate and gets your heart pumping faster, while vigorous activity involves gasping for breath. Moderate-intensity aerobic activity means anything that makes your breathing rate go up, and vigorous refers to anything that makes you gasp for breath. Walking, cycling, swimming, dancing, gardening and recreational sport all promote health. Sitting is also bad, so for those who sit a lot, reducing it is also good. Taking frequent breaks to stand up, walking or short walks during breaks at work, and using stairs rather than elevators contribute to higher levels of physical activity.

The emphasis of weight management should be on lifestyle change, not on diet. Over the years, healthy body weight can be kept by balanced diet, regular exercise, good sleeping habits and stress management. Regular exercise, along with healthy eating habits and suggested screening, is one of the best strategies to prevent colon cancer and to help maintain a healthy life.

Tobacco, Alcohol, and Other Lifestyle Risks

Lifestyle factors can make a significant difference in health and a person's risk of colon cancer. Although genetics and age are factors that cannot be controlled, there are several things an individual can do to control their daily habits. You can greatly decrease your risk of getting this disease if you stop harmful behaviours and change your lifestyle.

It is well known that cigarette smoking is a risk factor for many cancers, including those of the colon. There are thousands of chemicals in tobacco smoke, many known to cause cancer. These substances can get into the bloodstream and may harm DNA throughout the body, even in the colon. People who have smoked for a long time are more likely to develop polyps in the colon that can lead to colon cancer if not treated. Smoking also can raise the chance of cancer recurrence after therapy, and cause many other health problems including problems with the heart, stroke and chronic lung disease.

Drinking too much alcohol has also been linked to a higher risk of colon cancer. Alcohol can damage cells lining the digestive tract and interfere with the body's ability to absorb important nutrients such as folate, which plays a vital role in DNA repair and cell growth. The more alcohol consumed over a period of time, the greater the risk. There is a recommendation from health experts to limit alcohol consumption or abstain from it to lower the risk of cancer.

Overall health is also affected by sleep and stress. Uncontrolled stress and sleep deprivation can lead to bad habits like eating too much, smoking, not exercising, and drinking too much. While there is ongoing research into the direct link between stress and colon cancer, emotional health can help make healthy lifestyle choices. A comprehensive approach is needed to prevent colon cancer. Combining quitting smoking, limiting alcohol, ensuring good sleep habits, stress management and the adoption of good daily habits all contribute to good digestive health and lower long-term cancer risks.

The Importance of Regular Screening

One of the best ways to prevent colon cancer is to get screened regularly. Colon cancer is unlike many other cancers, which are hard to detect until they have symptoms, it usually starts as precancerous polyps that grow slowly over several years. Screening can help detect and remove these polyps before they turn into cancer, and can therefore prevent the disease.

Screening also finds cancer in the early stages before it is possible to treat it. If the cancer is diagnosed early, before it invades the lining of the colon, it can often be treated with surgery only. The more cancer advances and metastasizes away from the colon, the more complex the treatments and the poorer the prognosis. This shows that screening is important in the absence of symptoms.

Regular screening should start at age 45 for most adults with an average risk, but other recommendations may differ based on country, and on personal risk factors. There may be a need for earlier and more frequent screening in people with a family history of colon cancer, genetic syndromes, inflammatory bowel disease and other risk factors. Screening is based on an individual's risk and screening is recommended at specific intervals.

Many people do not get screening because they don't want to be uncomfortable, embarrassed or have to prepare for it. But screening techniques have come a long way, and the temporary nuisance is worth it for the possibility of averting a life-threatening illness. Most patients are comfortable throughout colonoscopy with the use of sedation. Despite the low numbers of screening, public education remains an important way to get people to participate in screening. Providers are asked to keep the discussion open with patients about screening options and to discuss concerns patients may have prior to screening. Screening should be viewed as part of a person's routine preventive health care, and it can help lower the risk of colon cancer, and the odds of better health.

Screening Tests: Colonoscopy, FIT, and Other Options

There are a number of tests available to screen for colon cancer and polyps that can develop into cancer. There are pros and cons to each way, and if you are a patient, healthcare providers can help you decide which is best for you, depending on your age, risk factors, medical history, and personal preferences.

Colonoscopy is known as the "gold standard" for colon cancer screening. In this procedure, a small camera is attached to a flexible tube and inserted into the colon, so that the doctor can view the entire lining of the colon. When polyps are detected, they can be easily removed and blocked from becoming cancer. If the colonoscopy is normal, then 10-year screening is generally recommended for those at average risk.

The fecal immunochemical test (FIT) is a type of stool test that can detect blood in the stool that isn't visible, which may be from bleeding caused by polyps or cancer. One advantage of FIT is that it can be done at home without any bowel preparation. It does, however, need to be repeated every year and if there are abnormal results, a follow-up colonoscopy should be performed. Another stool test that can be used is called stool DNA test that detects blood and also genetic changes that can indicate colon cancer. This test is typically given once a person is eligible, every 3 years. Positive results will necessitate colonoscopy, similar to FIT.

Flexible sigmoidoscopy is a procedure that looks at only the lower part of the colon and sometimes is used along with stool tests. CT colonography, also known as virtual colonoscopy, is a new type of imaging that looks at the colon and does not involve an actual colonoscopy, but does require bowel preparation. A traditional colonoscopy will be needed for biopsy or removal of polyps if abnormalities are found. While no screening test is foolproof, it is better to be screened in any recommended screening program than to not be screened at all. Consultation with the health care provider helps make sure that the person is getting the best test for their individual risk and health care needs.

Recognizing Early Warning Signs

While screening is used to help find colon cancer before symptoms occur, it's still important to be aware of colon cancer symptoms. Symptoms can be mild and mimic milder gastrointestinal disorders. Any changes that do not go away or have no obvious cause should always be assessed by a health care provider.

One of the most frequent symptoms is alterations in bowel habits which persist for several weeks. This can be chronic diarrhoea, constipation or intermittent diarrhoea and constipation. Some people may find that their stools are thinner than normal or that they don't feel like they have completely emptied their bowels after having a stool. An additional important warning sign is blood in the stool. Can be bright red or dark and turn stools black or tar-like. In some cases, the bleeding is microscopic and only can be detected by stool tests. If there is not an obvious cause for the rectal bleeding, it should be investigated immediately.

May have ongoing tummy discomfort too. Some people may have cramps, bloating, lots of gas or stomach pain all over. These symptoms are often seen in a variety of digestive issues, but if someone is experiencing any of these symptoms and is having digestive problems, they should not be ignored, especially if other red

flags are present. Colon cancer may result in unexplainable weight loss, fatigue and weakness due to the chronic loss of blood or the inability to absorb nutrients. Slow and persistent bleeding can cause anaemia, which can make a person feel tired despite getting a good night's sleep.

Keep in mind that these symptoms don't necessarily mean colon cancer. There are many other benign conditions which can result in similar symptoms such as haemorrhoids, infections and irritable bowel syndrome. However, if the changes continue, medical intervention is warranted as early diagnosis will help outcomes of treatment. People should never put off getting medical advice because symptoms are slight or "embarrassing. Early assessment will help healthcare providers determine the cause and start the right treatment, if needed.

Family History and Genetic Risk

Most colon cancers are due to lifestyle and age, but genes are also a factor. Knowledge of family history can help health provider to determine who needs more frequent screening or might start screening earlier.

An individual whose parent, sibling or child has had colon cancer generally has an increased risk compared to someone without a family history. The danger is even higher when the family member was diagnosed at a young age (before 50) or if more than one family member was affected. There are several inherited genetic syndromes which greatly raise the risk of colon cancer. Lynch syndrome or hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer is the most common inherited form of colon cancer. Lynch syndrome sufferers have a significantly higher lifelong risk of cancer and tend to develop cancer at an early age.

Another inherited condition that causes hundreds or thousands of colon polyps to form is called familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP), which is a different disease than Gardner syndrome. Nearly everyone affected will eventually get colon cancer if they do not receive treatment. Medical monitoring and prevention is key. Genetic counselling is used to understand the risks of inherited cancer. Counsellors talk with families about their history, and, if appropriate, about genetic testing; they also provide information about screening for family members. Testing can screen for the people who will need more frequent screening and can help to allay the anxiety of those who do not have inherited mutations.

Healthy lifestyle choices are important even among those who have an inherited risk. By maintaining a healthy weight, eating a balanced diet, getting regular exercise, not smoking, limiting alcohol and following the recommended screening programs, individuals can minimize overall risk and enhance long-term health. Information about family history gives people the power to make informed health care decisions and collaborate with health care professionals in developing family-specific prevention strategies.

Preventive Care and Working With Your Healthcare Provider

The best way to prevent colon cancer is for someone to be an active member of their health care team. During routine checkups, you can discuss your risk factors, and update your family history, lifestyle, and determine the best screening schedule. But preventative care isn't just to treat illness, it's also geared towards maintaining health and lowering the chances of illness occurring.

Primary care providers are key to prevention. At regular visits they will review things like age, weight, diet, exercise, smoking and drinking alcohol and any other medical problems. These conversations are used to explore ways to make changes to lifestyle to enhance health. Vaccinations, management of chronic illnesses, and/or specialist referrals may be also be recommended by the provider where appropriate.

Any gastrointestinal (GI) complaints, no matter how insignificant they may appear, should be addressed by the individual with their healthcare provider. If these symptoms are present and persist for a long time, or if bowel habits change, or if weight is lost, there is stomach pain, or if there is blood in the stool, these should not be overlooked. Early assessment can help identification of diagnosis and treatment early!

During the time of preventive care, medication use may be discussed. Some studies indicate that aspirin could help lower the risk of colorectal cancer in certain individuals, especially those who have specific risk

factors when it comes to heart disease. But, aspirin may make stomach ulcers and bleeding more likely and should be taken only under medical supervision. Prior to recommending, healthcare providers take into account the potential benefits and risks.

Patient education is a part of preventive care. Healthcare professionals give advice on diet, exercise, quitting smoking, weight loss and stress. They may be able to provide a referral to a dietitian, exercise specialist, smoking cessation program, and community resources for healthy living. Establishing a trusting relationship with a health care provider helps to communicate and promotes regular health care. Regular screening, healthy lifestyle choices and continuous medical advice can significantly help decrease the risk of colon cancer and also help to improve overall health and quality of life.

Colon cancer is one of the most common cancers worldwide, and one of the most preventable. Medical research has shown that much of the risk of many cases can be prevented by making healthy choices, having regular check-ups and detecting pre-cancerous changes early. By grasping these preventive measures, a person can have some control over his or her health before the onset of disease.

We have discussed the various factors that affect the risk of developing colon cancer throughout this book, such as diet, exercise, weight, smoking, drinking alcohol, family history and genetic disorders. The importance of screening for cancer (colonoscopy and stool based tests) and identifying warning signs have also been discussed. These measures are all effective at decreasing the incidence of colon cancer and the number of colon cancer deaths.

Prevention isn't perfection. Rather, it's a series of educated decisions over a long period of time. In addition to reducing the risk of cancer, it is important to replace unhealthy foods with healthier options, stay physically active, maintain a healthy weight, avoid tobacco, limit alcohol intake and make regular doctor's appointments for overall health. Everyone should be part of the process of raising awareness and promoting preventive care, including healthcare providers, families, communities and public health organizations. Discussions about digestive health and the importance of regular screening can help mitigate fear and stigma and increase the likelihood of early detection.

Each person can do something to make a positive difference that will help maintain a healthy colon throughout his or her life. While there are some risk factors that can't be modified, there are many risk factors that can be controlled. People can significantly decrease their risk of colon cancer and enhance their life expectancy by adopting healthy lifestyle habits and regularly having screening tests recommended by their doctor.

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