

# Cancer of the Colon and Rectum

The colon is also called the large bowel or large intestine. It is the lower 5 to 6 feet of the digestive system. The last 8 to 10 inches of the colon is the rectum. Colon cancer, sometimes called colorectal cancer, is cancer that starts in the large intestine or rectum.

Cancer cells are abnormal cells. Cancer cells grow and divide more quickly than healthy cells. Some cancer cells may form growths called tumors. All tumors increase in size, but some tumors grow quickly, others slowly. Some cancer cells spread to other parts of the body through the blood and lymph systems.

## Signs

Cancer of the colon and rectum often has no signs.

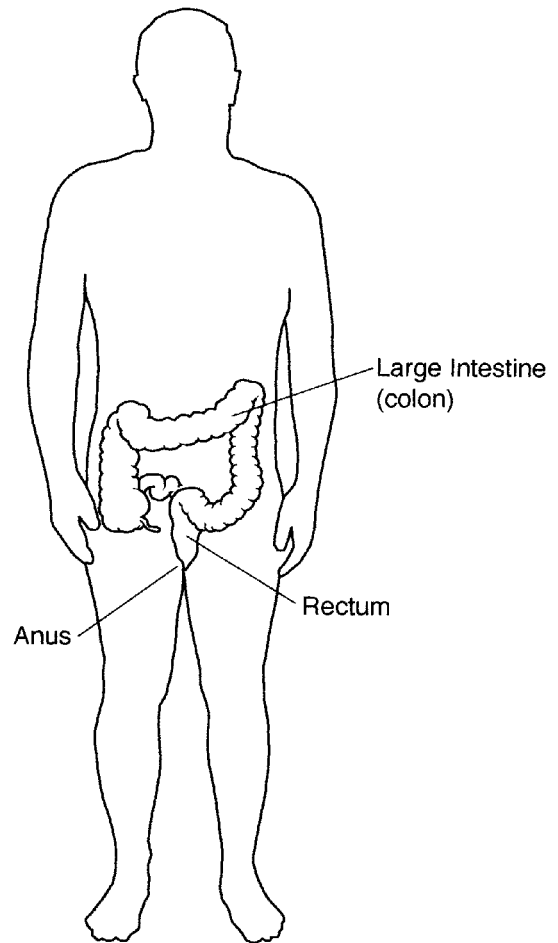
**See your doctor** if you have any of these signs:

- Dark or bright red blood in or on the stool
- Diarrhea or constipation that does not go away or other change in bowel habits
- Pain in the lower abdomen
- Loss of weight for no reason
- Feel tired or lack energy
- Stools are more narrow than usual for more than a few days. This may be from a tumor in the rectum.

## Types of Tumors

Tumors found in the colon or rectum can be benign or malignant.

- **Benign tumors** do not spread to other parts of the body. They can be removed by surgery. Cysts are benign tumors that contain fluid.
- **Malignant tumors** may grow into the nearby tissues, organs or blood.



## Your Care

### Tests

If your doctor thinks you may be at risk for cancer, you may have some of these tests:

- **Physical exam** with a rectal exam where the doctor inserts a lubricated gloved finger into the rectum to feel for lumps.
- **Sigmoidoscopy** where a thin, flexible tube is put into the rectum to let the doctor see inside the lower part of the colon.
- **Colonoscopy** where a thin, flexible tube is put into the rectum to let the doctor see the entire length of the colon.
- Samples of tissue are removed for testing, called a **biopsy**.
- **Barium enema** where liquid barium and air is put into the rectum to see the colon on x-ray.
- **Blood tests** to check blood loss and how well the liver is working.

If tumors are found, your doctor may order x-rays, CT scans and other types of blood tests to see if the cancer has spread to other parts of the body.

### Treatment

After all of your tests are done, your doctor will talk to you about treatments that are best for you. Treatment may include:

- **Surgery** to remove the tumor. The kind of surgery will depend on the location and size of the tumor. Often, the part of the colon with cancer is removed.
- **Radiation therapy** to stop or slow the growth of cancer. It is often used after surgery to destroy any cancer cells that may remain.
- **Chemotherapy** medicines to kill cancer cells. These medicines are given by mouth, by injection into a muscle or vein, or directly into the affected organ to treat cancer. These medicines help kill cancer cells.
- **Immunotherapy** may also be called biotherapy. This treatment uses natural substances made by the body's immune system. This kills cancer cells, slows their growth or helps the immune system fight the cancer in a better way.

You may have one or more cancer treatments. Some patients have surgery followed by radiation therapy or chemotherapy.

### Follow-up Care

Regular visits to your doctor are important. Your care at these visits may include blood tests, CT scans, chest x-rays or other tests. Report any problems to your doctor between visits.

**Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns.**

---