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# ADULT HEALTH BULLETIN

**JUNE 2009**

## THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: COLORECTAL CANCER

### What You Should Know about Colorectal Cancer

The colon and rectum are a part of the body's digestive system and are responsible for absorbing nutrients from food and eliminating waste from the body. Colorectal cancer is a disease that causes cancer in the large intestine (colon) or the rectum (end of the colon). Cancer begins to form when malignant (cancer) cells form in the tissues of the colon or rectum.

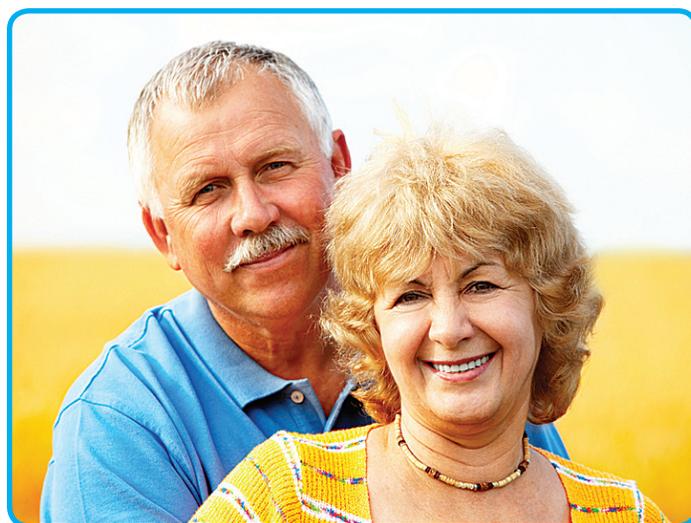
Colorectal cancer is the third leading cause of cancer related death in the United States in both men and women. Colorectal cancer is a significant health concern for Kentuckians given that both incidence and death rates from colorectal cancer are higher in Kentucky than in the United States.

If colorectal cancer is detected early, before symptoms begin, it is 85 to 95 percent curable. Without a doubt, this underscores the need for preventive health screening for colorectal cancer.

### Symptoms of Colorectal Cancer

Many people will have no symptoms at all in the early stages of the disease. Some of the same symptoms that occur with colorectal cancer, also happen in other non-cancerous conditions. It is for this reason that it is very important you consult your doctor if any of the following conditions occur:

- Diarrhea, constipation, or other change in bowel habits that won't go away
- Blood (either bright red or very dark) in your stool or rectal bleeding



- Black and tar-like stools
- Persistent discomfort, such as cramps, bloating, gas or pain in your abdomen
- Feeling that your bowel does not completely empty
- Narrow stool
- Abdominal pain with a bowel movement
- Unexplained anemia
- Weight loss for no known reason
- Weakness and tiredness
- Nausea and vomiting

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## *If colorectal cancer is detected early it is 85 to 95 percent curable.*

### **Risk Factors for Colorectal Cancer**

- **Age:** About 90 percent of colorectal cancer cases are diagnosed in adults age 50 or older.
- **A personal history of cancer**
- **Colorectal polyps:** Polyps are growths in the inner wall of the colon or rectum. They are common in people over age 50. Most polyps are benign (not cancer), but some polyps (adenomas) can become cancer. Finding and removing polyps may reduce the risk of colorectal cancer.
- **Family history of cancer**
- **A history of inflammatory intestinal disorders**
- **Genetic conditions that affect the colon**
- **Smoking**
- **Diet**
- **An inactive lifestyle**

### **Screening for Colorectal Cancer**

The purpose of screening for colorectal cancer is to detect the cancer in its earliest stages when the rate for survival is highest. Most colorectal cancers develop from polyps. Screening can find and remove polyps before they become cancerous—actually preventing the disease—and can also detect colorectal cancer in its early stages when the chances of curing the disease is good. Screening and early detection save lives!

Commonly used screening and diagnostic procedures include the following:

- **Physical exam**
- **Fecal occult blood test (FOBT) or stool blood test:** Test checks your stool for blood that can only be seen with a microscope
- **Digital Rectal Exam:** A manual exam of the rectum in which a doctor or nurse inserts a lubricated gloved finger into the rectum to check for abnormalities like lumps.
- **Double-Contrast Barium Enema:** Series of x-rays of the lower intestines. Patients are asked to swallow a liquid containing Barium, which coats the intestines, allowing the intestines to show up on x-ray.
- **Sigmoidoscopy:** Procedure in which a sigmoidoscope (lighted tube with a camera) is used to look inside

of the rectum and lower colon for polyps, abnormal areas and cancer. If polyps are found, the doctor can remove them during the procedure.

- **Colonoscopy:** Procedure to look inside the colon and rectum for polyps, abnormal areas and cancer by inserting a long, lighted tube with a camera called a colonoscope through the rectum into the colon.
- **Biopsy:** The removal of cells or tissues from the colon so they can be viewed under a microscope to check for signs of cancer.
- **Virtual colonoscopy:** A non-invasive procedure that uses a CT scan to create a series of x-rays which provide detailed images of the colon and rectum to check for polyps or anything abnormal.

Adopting healthy lifestyle habits, such as quitting smoking, not smoking, eating a healthy diet, and exercising regularly, may actually prevent some forms of cancer. Talk with your doctor or health care professional about what you can do to lower your risk of developing cancer.

#### **USEFUL RESOURCES:**

**National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service**  
1-800-4-CANCER

**Markey Cancer Center**  
University of Kentucky  
1-866-340-4488

#### **SOURCES:**

- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/colon-cancer/DS00035/METHOD=print>
- <http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/pdq/treatment/colon/patient/>
- <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000262.htm>

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## ADULT HEALTH BULLETIN

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