

Colorectal Cancer Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ):

What is Colorectal Cancer?

Globally, cancer of the colon and rectum is the third leading cause of cancer in males and the fourth leading cause of cancer in females, according to the American Cancer Society. Colorectal cancer occurs in both men and women and is most often found among people who are over the age of 50.

Colorectal refers to the colon and rectum, which together make up the large intestine. Colorectal cancer can originate anywhere in the large intestines. The majority of colorectal cancers develop first as polyps, abnormal growths inside the colon or rectum that may become cancerous.

What causes Colorectal Cancer?

The exact cause of most colorectal cancers is not yet known, however quite often colorectal cancers occur in people with no known risk factors. Most cases of colorectal cancer begin as small growths, or polyps, inside the colon or rectum. People are more likely to develop colorectal cancer if they are older than 50, have a family history of this cancer, or have rare inherited colon cancer syndromes.

What are the symptoms of Colorectal Cancer?

Colorectal cancer develops with few, if any, symptoms at first. However, if symptoms are present, they may include:

- Blood in or on the stool
- A change in bowel habits
- Stools that are narrower than usual
- General, unexplained stomach discomfort
- Frequent gas, pains, or indigestion
- Unexplained weight loss
- Chronic fatigue

Who is at risk to develop colorectal cancer?

- Colorectal cancer occurs in men and women of all racial and ethnic groups.
- Most colorectal cancers are diagnosed in people aged 50 years or older. The risk for developing colorectal cancer increases with age.
- A family history of colorectal cancer or colorectal polyps increases a person's risk of developing colorectal cancer.
- Certain diseases of the intestines, including inflammatory bowel disease, can increase the risk for colorectal cancer.

Should you get tested?

You might choose to be tested because:

- You have received genetic counseling, understand the risks and benefits of testing, and

feel that the benefits outweigh the risks.

- You have a personal history of more than 20 colon polyps, especially at a young age.
- You have a parent, brother, or sister who has familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) and hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC).
- You would be very anxious not knowing whether you have an increased chance of getting cancer.
- You would consider whether to have children if you had FAP and HNPCC.
- Your health insurance would help pay for the test.

How is Colorectal Cancer diagnosed and treated?

Cancer of the colon is a highly treatable and often curable disease when localized to the bowel. It is the second most frequently diagnosed malignancy in the United States as well as the second most common cause of cancer death. Surgery is the primary treatment. When detected early, colorectal cancer can be effectively treated - even cured.

What is colon cancer genetic testing?

Colon cancer genetic testing can tell you whether you carry a rare changed, or mutated, gene that can cause colon cancer. Although most people who get colon cancer do not have one of these mutated genes, having them greatly increases your chance of getting colon cancer. If you have a family history of colon cancer, you may want to have a blood test to look for changed genes. The most common genetic changes occur in two conditions: familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) and hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC).

Because it is important to learn about the pros and cons of genetic testing before you have the blood test, your doctor will recommend genetic counseling to help you weigh the pros and cons of genetic testing. Genetic counselors are trained to explain the test and its results, but you make the decision about whether to have the test.

Hoag's Hereditary Cancer Program offers two genetic counselors to review your family history and provide access to genetic blood testing. To schedule an appointment, call 949/764-5764.

Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk for colorectal cancer?

According to the American Cancer Society, if everyone got tested for colorectal cancer, tens of thousands of lives could be saved each year. There is strong scientific evidence that having regular screening tests for colorectal cancer beginning at age 50 reduces deaths from colorectal cancer. Screening tests can find precancerous polyps (abnormal growths) in the colon and rectum, and polyps can be removed before they turn into cancer. In this way, colorectal cancer is prevented. Increased physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight can also decrease the risk for colorectal cancer.

With additional questions, give us a call at 949/7-CANCER (722-6237).