Dear Alice,

What are the signs of colon cancer?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Colorectal cancer, which includes cancers of both the colon (the last four to six feet of the large intestine) and the rectum, is the third most common type of cancer in the United States and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths. Each year, approximately 150,000 new cases are diagnosed and more than 50,000 people die from the disease. Although the specific cause(s) of colorectal cancer is unknown, research has shown that certain lifestyle factors or choices may increase the risk of developing colon cancer, including:

- A high fat diet (especially from eating red meats and fried foods)
- Low fruit and vegetable consumption (fewer than five or more servings a day)
- Alcohol consumption
- Cigarette smoking
- Obesity
- Lack of exercise

Symptoms of colon cancer can include:

- Changes in bowel habits or the consistency of the stool (such as diarrhea, constipation, or thin rope-like stools)
- Blood in the stool or rectal bleeding (this can also be a sign of more benign problems, such as hemorrhoids or anal fissures? but it still needs to be checked by a health care professional)
- Persistent abdominal discomfort, gas, and/or cramping
- Feeling of incomplete evacuation
- Unexplained nausea and vomiting
- Unexplained weight loss
- Constant tiredness

These symptoms can be easily confused with other problems or missed entirely. Typically, early cancer does not cause pain, and by the time symptoms appear that are too severe to ignore, the cancer is well advanced. For this reason, people over the age of 50 years (the age...
group in which 90 percent of colon cancers occur) need to be screened for colon cancer. Screening typically includes testing for blood in the stool and/or a sigmoidoscopy, a procedure in which a small flexible scope is inserted into the rectum to view the lower part of the colon for abnormal growths, called polyps, which can develop into cancer over time. How often to go for screening and what type(s) of screening method(s) to use are decisions that need to be made in consultation with your health care provider, based upon your medical and family history.

For more information about colorectal cancer, you can visit some of the following links:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ? Basic Information about Colorectal Cancer [2]
- National Cancer Institute (NCI) ? What You Need To Know About Colon & Rectal Cancer [3]
- Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center ? Colorectal Cancer [5]

Many people skip colon cancer screening because they think that it's embarrassing and/or undignified to even mention to a medical professional, let alone request a procedure where the health care provider pokes around and peers into their bowels. This is also the reason that many don't report signs of colon cancer, such as bloody stools or changes in bowel movements. Failure to screen for and investigate signs of colon cancer is responsible for the high mortality rate associated with this disease. With regular screening and early detection, polyps can be removed before they become cancerous or have a chance to spread. The good news is that when detected early, colon cancer has a 90 percent survival rate.

Alice!

Related questions

- Benefits of eating fiber [8]
- Bloody stools: Should I worry about them? [9]
- Fruits and vegetables that can protect against cancer [10]
- I'm too young to have colon cancer [11]
- Bathroom reading and hemorrhoids!? [12]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [13]
Medical Services (CUMC) [14]
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If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/colorectal-cancer

Links