7 Treatment Options for Colon Cancer

by ERIC PATTERSON

Colon Cancer Treatment

You've had the fecal blood test, the barium enema, the scopes and the biopsy. Receiving a diagnosis of colon cancer can be extremely distressing and discouraging. However, with the diagnosis being made, you must shift your focus towards the next step — treatment. With colon cancer treatment, there is both good and bad news.

On the one hand, there are various effective treatments, which can offer hope to someone with a fresh diagnosis. On the other hand, with so many treatment options, it can be challenging and overwhelming to decide on the best options for your cancer and your life. Having a basic understanding of all the options that exist may help improve your outlook.

Surgery

As you might expect, colon cancer surgery involves removing the cancer during an operation. No matter the stage and severity of colon cancer, surgery is the most common treatment.

Colon cancer surgery can happen in three distinct ways:

- Local surgery: rather than cutting through the stomach area, a doctor will remove the cancer using tools through the rectum. This course of action is best for cancers found at very early stages.
- Resection of the colon: with larger cancers, the doctor will need to remove the diseased area of the colon as well as some surrounding healthy tissue. Once the cancer is removed, the surgeon will connect the healthy sections together.
- Resection of the colon with colostomy: if there is not enough healthy tissue to connect, the doctor will perform a colostomy, a procedure that involves making an opening in the abdomen that body waste can pass through. Colostomies may be permanent or temporary depending on how much of the colon must be removed.

Radiofrequency Ablation

Radiofrequency ablation is a unique colon cancer treatment that involves the doctor using a probe to kill cancer cells within the body. The probe has electrodes that kill cancer upon contact.

The treatment team can insert the probe directly through the skin or into a small incision made in the abdomen. Local or general anesthesia is needed depending on the route used to insert the probe.

Cryosurgery

Cryosurgery is a form of treatment that utilizes a specialized tool to freeze cancer cells in the body. Once the cells are frozen, they begin to die and can no longer reproduce.

This type of cryotherapy may not be appropriate for all cases, but it offers the advantages of being effective and safe.

Chemotherapy

As one of the more well-known cancer treatments, doctors use chemotherapy in many instances to slow or stop the progress of cancer in the body. For colon cancer, chemotherapy is a frequently used remedy.

Chemotherapy uses drugs and medications administered orally or intravenously to kill the cancer. If the colon cancer spreads to the liver, doctors can block the artery that carries blood into the liver and inject chemotherapy. This process allows the artery to distribute the drugs to the cancer with little spreading to the rest of the body.

Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy administers x-rays with high energy or other forms of radiation to the cancer, which kills it and stops it from spreading further. Doctors can administer radiation therapy two different ways:

- Internal radiation: radioactive material is encased in items shaped like needles, seeds or wire and placed within the body.
- External radiation: the radiation is transmitted from a machine outside of the body to the location of the cancer.

Each type of radiation comes with its own set of specific pros and cons. The doctor will weigh the options carefully before recommending a form of radiation therapy.

Targeted Therapy

While other forms of treatment for colon cancer attack healthy cells as well as cancer cells, targeted therapy aims to treat the disease differently. Targeted therapy uses techniques to only attack cancer cells while leaving healthy cells unharmed.

Targeted therapies include:

- Antibodies: called monoclonal antibodies, this targeted therapy is made from special immune system cells in a laboratory. Antibodies are provided through infusions and seek out cancer cells wherever they are.
- inhibitors: these treatments work by stopping the growth and development of the blood vessels cancer needs to progress. Without supply of blood, colon cancer cannot live.

Immunotherapy

The final form of treatment for colon cancer is called immunotherapy. This type involves using the body’s natural ability to fight disease and applying it to cancer.

By using special substances produced by the body or constructed in a lab, immunotherapy can improve, control or recreate the ability to fight cancer. Your doctor and other people may refer to this cancer treatment as biotherapy or biological therapy.

One common example of immunotherapy is called immune checkpoint inhibitor therapy. After being administered, these drugs tell T cells in the body to attack and kill cancer cells. The T cells would not target the tumors without these medications.

Perhaps the greatest asset of colon cancer treatment is that many of these treatments can be used together. Rather than picking only one, doctors may prescribe two or more strategies to combat colon cancer, which leads to higher success rates.