The Colon Cancer Symptoms You May Not Know About

by PAULA CLARK

Strange Symptoms of Colon Cancer

Colorectal cancer, also known simply as colon cancer is often called the silent killer. That's because you may have no symptoms in the early stages, you may have symptoms that can be confused with other illnesses, or you may experience non-obvious or strange symptoms of colon cancer; thwarting your best chance to get a diagnosis while it's treatable. And since colon cancer isn't exactly a hot topic in everyday conversation, you may not know who or when to ask for help.

Your family doctor is clearly the best person to call for a colon cancer chat. But given their lack of time (and some people's aversion to doctors), why don't we talk about the lesser known risk factors and symptoms of colon cancer right now. (Don't worry, it'll just be between us.)

One of the best tools in your cancer prevention kit is knowing your risk factors and vague symptoms that can be easily ignored.

Risk Factors for Colon Cancer

Before we take a look at the symptoms, let's talk about risk. When talking to your doctor, knowing and sharing your personal risk factors can help them decide if it's time to screen you.

The more obvious risks include family history and genetics, smoking, obesity and your age . Older than 50 is higher risk, but recent guidelines say those with a family history of colon cancer should start screening at 40. Other risk factors you may expect are high alcohol consumption (at least 3 drinks per day), diet and a sedentary lifestyle.

Risk factors that may be less familiar include your racial, ethnic and health background. If you're African American or have Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, your risk goes up. Having a history of other illnesses like breast, ovarian or uterine cancer, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), growth hormone disorder or Type II diabetes is also a risk factor.

There are also some that may surprise you. Women working a night shift a minimum of three nights a month for 15 years or more are at a higher risk, as well as tall people. These last two may be related to hormonal fluctuations. Who knew?

And finally, exposure to ionizing radiation is a rare risk.

Symptoms of Colorectal Cancer

Armed with that information, let's look at the common symptoms of colon cancer.

Localized physical symptoms like these will probably make sense:

- diarrhea
- constipation
- stool (poop) that looks narrower than usual
- feeling like the rectum is not completely empty after a bowel movement
- bright or very dark red blood in the stool
- bleeding from the rectum
- pain or discomfort in the rectum
- a lump in the abdomen or rectum
- pelvic pain

These general physical symptoms may also occur with colon cancer:

- gas, abdominal cramps and feeling bloated
- fatigue and weakness
- anemia, which can cause fatigue and shortness of breath
- nausea and vomiting
- loss of appetite
- pain in the abdomen, back, buttocks or legs
- unexplained weight loss

And these serious symptoms should take you to the doctor or hospital no matter what:

- a blockage in the intestine (called a bowel obstruction)
- swollen lymph nodes
- enlarged liver
- jaundice
- a buildup of fluid in the abdomen (called ascites)
- breathing problems

You can see why it's hard to diagnose colon cancer early enough to treat it. Who doesn't have one or more of those symptoms once in a while? Many of these symptoms can also be caused by other conditions, whether minor or serious. Some of these symptoms are less obvious for colon cancer, so they can seem strange, but it's safer to get them checked out anyway.

The key is to consider all the information together and discuss it with your family doctor. They can help you decide if it's time to screen for colon cancer and/or some other conditions. If the symptoms turn out to be nothing serious, you'll be glad to know you won't need to start chemo, radiation or surgery anytime soon.

Your main job in preventing colon cancer is to know your personal risk factors, pay attention to your body, listen to your intuition and talk to your doctor as early as possible.

Catching it early is your best defense against this silent killer.

What to Do if You Are High Risk or Notice Symptoms

Colon Cancer Tests You Can Do at Home

When do you call your doctor and ask for a colonoscopy?

If something seems amiss or you fall into one of the higher risk groups, your doctor may start by ordering a home test that looks for trace amounts of blood in your stool.

Guaiac Fecal Occult Blood Test (gFOBT):

This test looks for trace amounts of blood in your stool with a chemical reaction on a card. This test must be done yearly and is considered the least effective.

Fecal Immunochemical Test (FIT OR IFOBT):
The FIT also looks for imperceptible traces of blood in your stool by using antibodies for human blood. This test uses a higher-tech method and is more accurate. It's also easier because you won't need to change your diet. The test is unaffected by food or vitamins.

If a home test comes back positive, your doctor will need to take a look inside to see why you're bleeding.

Colon Cancer Tests Conducted by Your Doctor

Flexible Sigmoidoscopy:
Your doctor can check the lower part of your colon and rectum with a sigmoidoscope. It's about the width of your finger and has a light and camera connected to a display screen.

For this test you may need to drink clear liquids the day before to clean out your system. It typically takes 10-20 minutes and is done without a sedative.

If a polyp is found, your doctor will take a sample to send to the lab. A positive result means you'll need a colonoscopy.

Colonoscopy:
Colonoscopies are the most invasive and most accurate test for colon cancer.

There's a lot more prep for this one. You'll probably need to drink only clear liquids for two days before the exam, take laxatives the day before and possibly get an enema on the day of the test.

The procedure takes at least 30 minutes but may take more if polyps need to be removed right away. You'll be sedated to make it more comfortable.

The good news? If the test is clear, you won't need another one for 10 years.

Whether you're in a high-risk category and/or are showing symptoms, I hope you'll agree the inconvenience and discomfort is worth saving your life.

For more resources, see our article on colon cancer treatments.