

Colorectal cancer

Although colorectal cancer can occur at any age in both men and women, about 90 per cent of patients are over the age of 50. In the US, it is the second most common cancer and the average lifetime risk of developing colorectal cancer is one in 20.



“Colorectal cancer cases have been steadily increasing in Singapore over the last 20 years, now overtaking lung cancer in males at 4,456 cases from 2006 to 2010. Singapore has one of the highest incidences of colorectal cancer in Asia together with Japan, Taiwan and Australia.”

– NATIONAL CANCER CENTRE SINGAPORE

THE GORY BIT: The colon is the part of the digestive system where unwanted waste material is stored and the rectum is the end of the colon, adjacent to the anus. Cancers of the colon and rectum are abnormal growths arising from the cells lining the inner wall of the large bowel.

THE RISK: Family or personal history of colorectal polyps or ulcerative colitis (long term inflammation of the colon) may increase the risk of colorectal cancer. A sedentary lifestyle, obesity, a diet high in animal fat or meat cooked at high temperatures, smoking and excessive alcohol consumption are also linked to possible increased risks of colorectal cancer.

TELLTALE SIGNS: Many polyps and cancers of the colon and rectum do not produce symptoms until they become fairly large. Symptoms include blood in the stools, persistent change in usual bowel habits such as constipation or diarrhea, weight loss for no reason and anaemia (low red blood cell count).

THE CHECK: The American Cancer Society recommends regular colorectal cancer screening beginning at age 50. The screening can highlight polyps before they become cancerous and regular screening is proven to reduce the risk of colorectal cancer by up to a third.

TREATMENTS OPTIONS: Surgery is usually the main treatment for colorectal cancer and in most cases results in a complete cure. In some cases, radiation therapy and chemotherapy may also be used. According to the American Society of Colon & Rectal Surgeons, the possibility of curing patients after symptoms develop is 50 per cent. It increases to 80 per cent if patients are treated at an early stage before symptoms develop.
– Dr Quah Hak Mien from Quah Hak Mien Colorectal Centre

BEAT IT: Research by Cancer Research UK suggests that about one in 10 cancers are linked to an unhealthy diet. A balanced diet of at least five servings of vegetables and fruits daily with little red meat and reduced fat intake can lower the risk of developing cancer.