

HOW TO MAINTAIN GOOD COLON HEALTH AND PREVENT COLON CANCER



By Dr Quah Hak Mien

What is the colon?

The colon is another name for the large intestine or large bowel. The colon is an organ that is a part of the digestive system in the human body. The digestive system is in charge of processing the food we eat to give our bodies the energy.

What does the colon do for us?

The colon plays a very important role in the way our bodies use the food we eat. Let's take a walk through how food travels in the body:

- Firstly, our teeth chew the food into smaller pieces in the mouth. The tongue and saliva turn the food into small portions, which is passed down the gullet (oesophagus) into the stomach.
- In the stomach, the gastric juices and the powerful muscles of the stomach break down the food into smaller bits and churn up the food until it is a creamy

liquid. This liquid is then moved into the small bowel.

- In the small bowel, more digestive juices with enzymes are mixed in and the food is broken down into smaller particles. All the important nutrients and vitamins are absorbed in the small bowel into the system to fuel the body.
- After the nutrients are absorbed, the leftover, which is mostly in liquid form, moves into the colon. The water is absorbed in the colon. Bacteria in the colon break down the remaining material. The colon moves the leftover materials into the rectum. The rectum is a storage reservoir for the waste at the end of the colon. The waste, or stool, is then passed out of the body via the anus when the rectum is full.

A healthy colon will function well and rid the body of the waste it no longer needs. If your colon is not working the way it should, you will experience problems such as bloating, gas and pain.

Diet for Healthy Colon

Healthy eating is good for your overall health. A healthy diet can maintain good digestive health as well as reduce your risk of diseases like heart attack, diabetes and stroke. Having a low-calorie diet that includes fruits and vegetables is important to a healthy colon. The Ministry of Health, Singapore recommends five or more servings of vegetables and fruits daily. Each serving is half a cup. Reduce the intake of red meat, especially those cooked at high temperatures or barbecued, and consumption of fat, especially animal fat. Avoid overeating as obesity may increase your risk of cancer and cause a whole host of other health problems. Cut down on alcohol and drink only in moderation.

Exercise regularly for at least two to three times a week for half an hour to an hour. The exercise may include jogging, brisk walking, swimming and cycling. The intensity of the exercise should leave one mildly breathless.

Some suggestions of high fibre foods:

- Vegetables:
 - Carrots
 - Corn
 - Broccoli
 - Cauliflower
 - Peas
 - Spinach
 - Celery
- Fruits:
 - Apples with skin
 - Bananas
 - Raisins and sultanas
 - Mangos
 - Pears with skin
 - Guava
 - Oranges
 - Prunes
- Breads, Grains, Cereals & Beans:
 - Wholemeal bread
 - Red and green beans
 - Brown rice
 - Whole grain crackers
 - Branflakes, muesli and oats

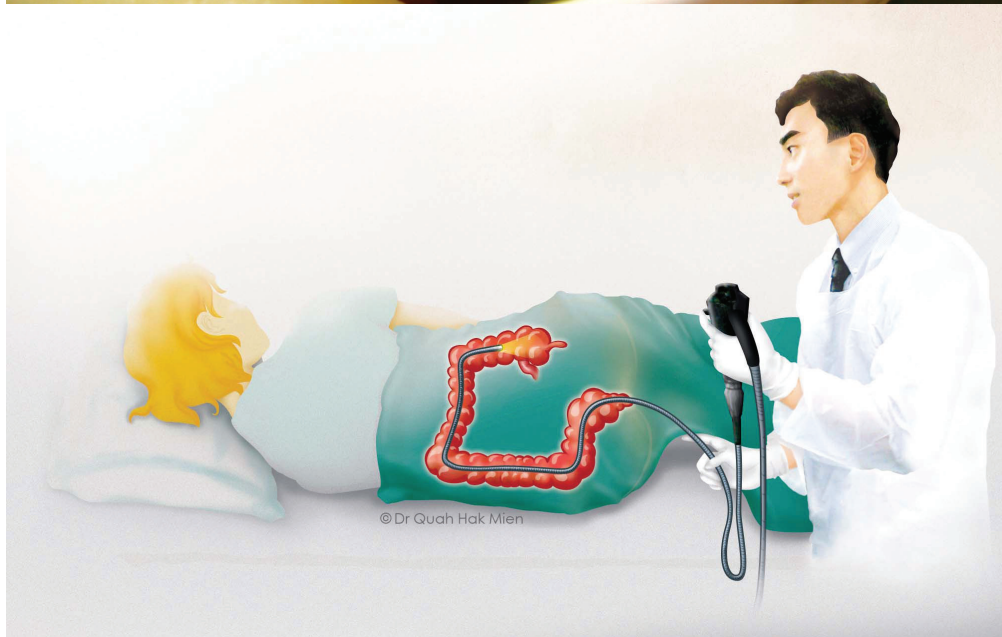
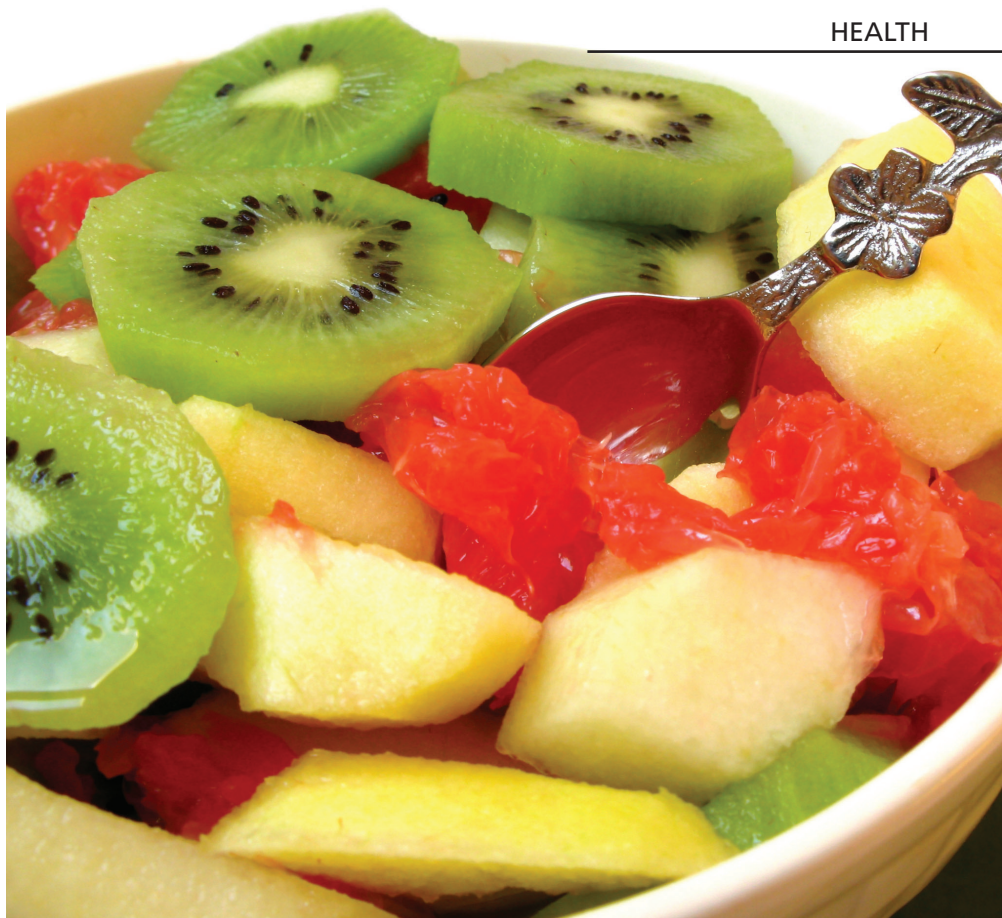
Colon and rectal cancer or colorectal cancer is increasing in incidence and has become the most common cancer in Singapore in recent years. The lifetime probability of an individual developing colorectal cancer is approximately one in 20, and is among the highest in the world. A big proportion of patients are still diagnosed at the advanced stage of the disease. This is a tragedy because most cases are curable if they are diagnosed early. The cure rate for localised colon cancer can be as high as 90 per cent. However, prevention is still the best.

Prevention of colon cancer

Two possible strategies may be adopted. The first is to reduce your risk factors. Eat a healthy balanced diet that includes sufficient amount of fruits, vegetables and whole grain, which contain fibre and antioxidants. Cut down on fat intake, especially from animal sources. Cigarette smoking has been confirmed to contribute to colon and rectal cancer, and also accounts for more than 90 per cent of lung cancer cases. The risk begins to fall as soon as a smoker quits. So it's time to stop smoking!

Participate in colon cancer screening

Most colon and rectal cancer are believed to have developed from polyps. Polyps are small benign tumours in the colon. Colonoscopy detection and removal of polyps may result in a reduced colon cancer risk. A polyp removed is a potential cancer prevented. The second strategy – screening for colon cancer – is very important as it has been proven to save lives. In the US and Northern European countries, colon cancer deaths has been falling, and this has been attributed to screening, early detection and prevention with the removal of polyps. It is advisable to go for a colon check from the age of 50 years old to detect for colorectal polyps or cancer, even if you have no symptoms. You may consider a stool test or colonoscopy.



Dr Quah Hak Mien is a specialist surgeon at Gleneagles Medical Centre. His clinical interest is in the treatment of colorectal diseases. His scope of work includes managing a wide range of conditions including colorectal cancer, diverticular disease, inflammatory bowel disease, perianal diseases like piles, anal fistula, and anal fissure. He also has clinical expertise in functional bowel disorders like irritable bowel syndrome, constipation and faecal incontinence.



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