

March is colorectal cancer awareness month.

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Now I know everyone doesn't want to go to the doctor to have a tube put in a place where there shouldn't be a tube, but this is so important. Colon cancer affects over 150,000 people each year and 52,000 die of this preventable cancer every year (American Cancer Society, Cancer Statistics 2007). Colon cancer is the 4th most common cancer but the number 2 cause of cancer death. These are very sobering statistics especially since the 5 year survival for colon cancers caught early (stage I, II) is over 90%. How do you catch it early? Follow the screening guidelines from the American Cancer Society (ACS).

ACS Screening Guidelines for Colon Cancer

Age	Test
Starting at age 50 (or 45 if you are African-American)	Annual fecal occult blood test AND Flexible Sigmoidoscopy every 5 years OR Colonoscopy every 10 years

What causes colon cancer?

Genetic conditions can increase your risk of colon cancer but they only account for 2-5% of all colon cancers. Other diseases such as inflammatory bowel disease also increase the risk but the majority of colon cancers are not associated with these conditions. They are called sporadic cancers and diet and lifestyle play an important role in the risk of these cancers.

How important is diet?

Red meat has been linked to an increased risk of colon cancer. A recent report in JAMA (2005;293:172-182) showed that people that ate the highest amounts of red meat had a 30-40% increased risk of colon cancer compared to those who ate the lowest amounts. Processed meats increased the risk by 50%. Chicken and fish do not increase the risk, in fact fish consumption may decrease your risk.

How much can you eat?

Red meat: 3 ounces/day for men, 2 ounces/day for women

Processed meat: 1 ounce/5-6 days for men, 1 ounce/2-3 days for women. One slice of bologna = 1 ounce, 2-3 strips of bacon = ½ ounce.

Fiber also has been found to decrease the risk of colon cancer in two studies published in the Lancet (2003;361:1491-1495, 1496-1501). In a study of over 38,000 people they found that those that ate at least 33 grams of fiber daily were 25-27% less likely to have colon polyps than those that ate only 12 grams of fiber daily.

Fruits and vegetables are also important to prevent colon cancer. A study of Swedish women (Journal National Cancer Institute 2001;93:525-531) demonstrated an increased risk of colon cancer of 65% in those who ate less than 1.5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily compared to those who ate more than 2.5 servings. More recent research suggests that consumption of fruits and vegetables is most important for those that have deficient DNA repair enzymes (Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev 2005;14(7):1619-1625).

Supplements that help prevent colon cancer

Promising initial studies suggest that colon cancer might be prevented with supplements such as calcium, selenium, aspirin, celebrex, and sulindac. Other vitamins have not been so useful; vitamin E, beta-carotene, vitamin A, vitamin C, and combinations of A-C-E.

Finally, don't forget to exercise

The American Cancer Guidelines on Nutrition and Physical Activity for Prevention of Cancer (CA Cancer J Clinicians 2006;56:254-281) stresses the importance of physical activity and healthy lifestyle to prevent cancer. They estimate that 1/3 of the 500,000 cancer deaths can be attributed to diet, physical activity habits and other lifestyle choices. For adults they recommend 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise on 5 or more days a week. They note that 45-60 minutes would be preferable. So let's get out there and start moving!