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Colon and Rectal Cancer

Q: What are colon and rectal cancers?

A: Cancer is a disease in which cells become abnormal and form more cells in an uncontrolled way. Cancer that begins in the colon is called colon cancer. Cancer that begins in the rectum is called rectal cancer. The colon and rectum are parts of the body's digestive system, which removes nutrients from food and stores waste until it passes out of the body. Together, the colon and rectum form a long, muscular tube called the large intestine (also called the large bowel). The colon is the longest part of the large intestine. The rectum is the last several inches of the large intestine closest to the anus. Cancers affecting either of these organs also may be called colorectal (koh-luh-REK-tuhl) cancer.

Q: Why should I be concerned about colon and rectal cancer?

A: Colorectal cancer is the third most common non-skin cancer in both women and men. It also is the third leading cause of cancer death among men and women. Colorectal cancer is most often found in people over the age of 50. It is often called a "silent" disease because symptoms don't always show up until it is hard to cure. The good news is that colorectal cancer can be prevented if abnormal cells that lead to cancer are found and removed. Regular screening will help your doctor find abnormal cells that can lead to cancer. Regular screening also will help your doctor find cancer early, when it is most easily cured. If colorectal cancer is found in its early stages, it is up to 90 percent curable. ■

