

## **Frequently Asked Questions About Colorectal Cancer**

### **What is colorectal cancer?**

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the colon and rectum that begins with the development of non-cancerous polyps on the lining of the colon and rectum.

### **What is a polyp?**

Polyps are mushroom-like growths that form when cells lining the colon grow, divide and reproduce in an unhealthy, disorderly way. Polyps can become cancerous over time, invading the colon wall and surrounding blood vessels, and spreading to other parts of the body.

### **What causes colorectal cancer?**

The exact causes of colorectal cancer are unknown, but the disease appears to be caused by both inherited and lifestyle factors. Lifestyle factors - such as cigarette smoking, lack of physical exercise, and obesity - may increase the risk of developing the disease. Genetic factors may determine a person's susceptibility to the disease, whereas dietary and other lifestyle factors may determine which at-risk individuals actually go on to develop the disease.

### **How common is colorectal cancer?**

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of death from cancer in the United States, and the third most common cancer overall. This year, more than 56,000 Americans will die from colorectal cancer and more than 140,000 new cases will be diagnosed. In fact, more women over the age of 75 die from colorectal cancer than from breast cancer. Eighty to 90 million Americans (approximately 25 percent of the U.S. population) are considered at risk because of age or other factors.

### **Who is at risk for colorectal cancer?**

Men and women aged 50 or older are at almost equal risk of developing colorectal cancer, and those who have a personal or family history of colorectal cancer or polyps are at high risk of developing the disease. Anyone who has a long-term personal history of inflammatory bowel disease also is at high risk.

### **How can you prevent colorectal cancer?**

See your doctor for yearly screenings if you are aged 50 or older. Be sure to maintain a diet low in animal fat and high in fruits, vegetables and fiber. Get regular exercise and avoid cigarette smoking. Keep alcohol consumption in moderation.

### **What are the screening options for detecting colorectal cancer?**

Screening tests are the best way to find and remove polyps before they become cancerous, or to find an early cancer, when treatment can be most effective. Several screening options exist. These include the fecal occult blood test (FOBT), flexible sigmoidoscopy, double contrast barium enema, and colonoscopy. Patients should talk to their colorectal surgeon or other healthcare provider to find out which screening method is right for them.