

THE COLON: WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT DOES, WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

What is the Colon?

The colon is also known as the large bowel or large intestine. It is an organ that is part of the digestive system (also called the digestive tract) in the human body. The digestive system is the group of organs that allow us to eat and to use the food we eat to fuel our bodies.

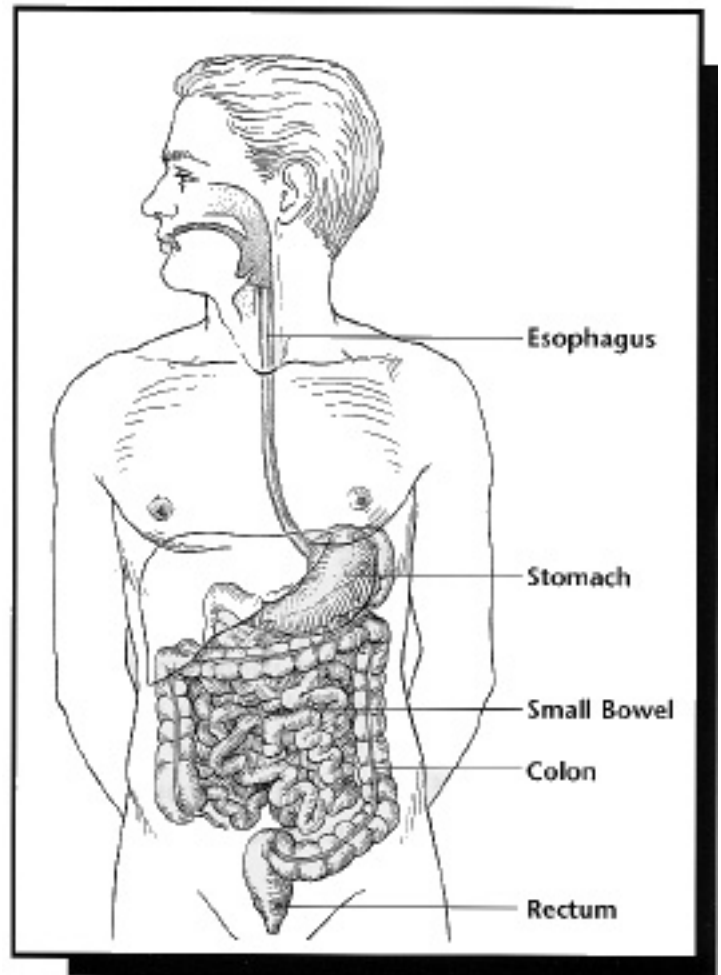
What Does the Colon Do?

The colon plays a very important role in how our bodies use the food we eat. Here is how food travels through the body.

1. Food begins in the mouth where it is chewed by the teeth into smaller pieces. The salivary glands release juices to help, and the tongue and saliva turn the food into even smaller pieces that will fit into the fit into the esophagus.

The esophagus is a 10-inch-long tube that connects to the stomach. Muscles in the esophagus move food into the stomach.

2. In the stomach, gastric juices—protein substances called enzymes—break down the food into smaller bits. The stomach has powerful muscles that churn up the food until it's a creamy liquid. This material moves into the small bowel.



3. In the small bowel, the food particles get even smaller. More juices from the pancreas, liver and gallbladder mix together in the small bowel. Here is where all the important vitamins and nutrients in food moves through the blood vessels that are in the lining of the small bowel. The blood takes the nutrients to other organs in the body. The nutrients are used to help repair cells and tissue.
4. What is left over, which is mostly liquid, then moves into the colon. The water is absorbed in the colon. Bacteria in the colon break down the remaining material. Then the colon moves the leftover material into the rectum.
5. The rectum is like a storage- holder for this waste. Muscles in the rectum move the waste, called stool, out of the body through the anus.

Why is the Colon Important?

Healthy eating is good for your overall health, but having a low-calorie, high-fiber diet that includes many fruits and vegetables is important to a healthy colon. A healthy colon will rid your body of the leftovers it no longer needs. Your stool is filled with bacteria, so it is important to pass this out of your body. If your colon isn't working the way it should, you will experience problems such as bloating, gas and pain.



March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, founded by the Cancer Research Foundation of America. Talk with your health care provider about colorectal cancer. Colorectal cancer is preventable, and is easy to treat and often curable when detected early. Ask your health care provider what kind of screening test you should have and when.