

COLORECTAL SURGERY

Busted: The top 3 colon cancer myths

In Singapore, it is the most common type of cancer in males and the second most common type of cancer in females — and numbers are rising. It's time to get the right information.



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There is nothing I can do to prevent colorectal cancer.

While certain things such as age, gender and genetics are uncontrollable risk factors for the disease, there are other factors that are well within your control. Poor diet — particularly the excessive consumption of red and processed meat — cigarette smoking, alcohol abuse, obesity and physical inactivity are closely linked to an increased risk of colon cancer. These environmental factors are postulated to lead to an increase in DNA damage in the colonic cells that causes cancer formation.

2

Colon cancer only affects those who are old, so I only need to screen for colon cancer if I am above 50.

Though 90% of cases are diagnosed in people aged 50 years or older, one in 10 cases of colorectal cancer occurs in those below the age of 50. In those who develop colorectal cancer before the age of 50, genetic factors rather than environmental factors are likely to play a bigger role. It is believed that inherited genetic mutations give rise to the earlier development of the cancer. Some people may benefit from starting colon cancer screening or genetic testing at a younger age. Those at higher risk include people:

- with a strong family history of three or more colorectal cancer cases affecting two or more generations
- with a strong family history of multiple relatives with cancers in other organs such as the uterus, ovary, small intestine, bladder and kidneys
- who were diagnosed with polyps before the age of 50
- with a family history of hereditary conditions such as familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP), Lynch syndrome, Peutz-Jegher's syndrome (PJS) and Cowden's syndrome

Colon cancer can affect patients as young as 17 years old, even those who have no family history. It is extremely important

to remember this: if you experience any abdominal symptoms that persist for more than two weeks, regardless of your age group, you should seek medical attention. If you are aged 50 years or older, and have no abdominal symptoms, you should still go for screening, as early detection and removal of polyps may be the best chance of preventing colorectal cancer.



3

If I have colon cancer, I'll know it.

Unfortunately, in the early stages, this cancer causes few to no symptoms; any symptom may seem innocent or can be easily overlooked. Some signs of colon cancer include a change in bowel movement patterns, blood or mucus in stools, unexplained and persistent abdominal pain or distension/bloating, and unexplained loss of weight and appetite. The danger is that, by the time a patient with colorectal cancer presents with symptoms, two-thirds of them would have entered the more advanced stages already. Regular screening is therefore important to detect colon cancer at its early stages. Screening with colonoscopy should start at 50 years old. For those with a family history, screening should start 10 years before the age of the youngest diagnosed individual in the family.