

Fact Sheet: Colorectal Cancer

Understanding Colorectal Cancer

- Colorectal cancer is cancer that affects the colon or the rectum, or both.
 - The colon is a six-foot-long muscular tube connecting the small intestine to the rectum. The colon, which along with the rectum is called the large intestine, is responsible for processing waste.
 - The rectum is the last six inches of the large intestine that stores waste before it exits the body through the anus.
- Colorectal cancer usually develops slowly over a period of years. It occurs when cells that line the colon or rectum become abnormal and form growths. A growth of tissue or tumor usually begins as a non-cancerous polyp. Most colon polyps are harmless, but certain types, called adenomatous polyps (adenomas), may develop into colorectal cancer over time. The majority of adenomas, however, do not become cancerous.
- More than 95 percent of colorectal cancers are adenocarcinomas, a type of tumor that originates in certain glands in the colon or rectum.
 - Other less common types of colorectal cancer include carcinoid tumors, which develop from hormones in the colon; gastrointestinal stromal tumors (GISTs), which develop from specialized cells in the colon wall; and lymphomas, which typically start in lymph nodes but may also develop in the colon or rectum.
- The wall of the colon and rectum consists of several layers. Colorectal cancer starts in the innermost layer and can grow through some or all of the other layers, where it can penetrate blood vessels or lymph vessels and potentially spread to other parts of the body. The extent to which colorectal cancer has spread is defined by staging.
 - Local: cancer that is confined to the wall of the colon and rectum
 - Regional: cancer that has spread through the wall of the colon or rectum and invaded nearby tissue or spread to nearby lymph nodes
 - Distant: cancer that has spread to other parts of the body, such as the liver or lung (also known as metastatic, or advanced-stage disease)

U.S. Statistics on Colorectal Cancer

- Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer and the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths among cancers that affect both men and women.
- About 1 in 20 people will develop colorectal cancer in their lifetime.
- According to the American Cancer Society, it is estimated that more than 143,000 new cases of colorectal cancer will be diagnosed in 2012, and more than 51,000 people will die from it.
- Approximately 60 percent of colorectal cancer cases are diagnosed at the locally advanced or metastatic stage. Although survival for early stage disease is relatively high, once colorectal cancer metastasizes to distant organs, five-year survival is estimated to be 12 percent.
- More than nine out of 10 people diagnosed with colorectal cancer are over age 50.

###