

Can colorectal cancer be prevented?

Q I hear that colorectal cancer is a very common type of cancer. Can you tell me more about it and how we can reduce the risk?

A Colorectal cancer (CRC) is a malignant tumour that occurs in the large intestine or colon. It can invade and spread to other parts of the body, resulting in death if not treated early.

In Singapore, CRC is one of the top three leading causes of cancer deaths. It is the most common type of cancer in men and the second most common type of cancer in women.

CRC can be prevented and cured if detected and treated at an early stage.

What are the causes?

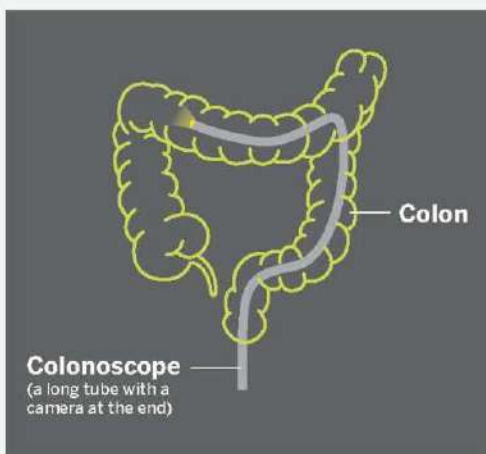
About 90 per cent of CRC cases do not have a single identifiable cause. Environmental, dietary and endogenous (internal) factors are suspected to be involved.

The remaining 10 per cent of CRC cases are due to identifiable genetic causes or defects in the genes, which predispose them to the development of CRC. These can be inherited, or passed down to the next generation.

How can we reduce the risk of CRC?

■ **Primary prevention:** This includes adopting a healthy lifestyle, such as exercising regularly, reducing dietary intake of animal fats and alcohol, increasing dietary intake of fibre, avoiding smoking and preventing obesity.

■ **Secondary prevention:** This involves medical screening of a healthy individual, which plays



The colonoscopy procedure enables a doctor to examine the whole length of the colon to detect any precancerous polyps or early-stage cancer.

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a pivotal role in reducing the incidence and mortality of CRC.

This is because early-stage CRC or colon polyps do not usually give rise to any symptoms such as changes in bowel habits, abdominal pain or rectal bleeding.

The current gold standard for CRC screening is to perform a colonoscopy to examine the whole length of the colon to detect any precancerous polyps or early-stage cancer.

The procedure has a high accuracy rate in detecting polyps and CRC.

Colonoscopy screening with removal of polyps have been proven to lower the incidence of CRC by 50 to 90 per cent.

When should we go for a colonoscopy?

At present, colonoscopy screening is recommended when a person reaches 50 years of age.

For people with a strong family history of CRC, colonoscopy screening should begin 10 years

earlier than the age of the affected family member.

The average risk of developing CRC in a population is about 5 per cent, but there are some people who have a higher risk, such as those with inflammatory bowel disease, colonic polyps and a strong family history of CRC or colonic polyps.

Regular colonoscopy surveillance is recommended for this group.

If you notice symptoms such as abdominal pain, a change in bowel habits or blood in your stools, do consult your family doctor for further evaluation and tests.



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