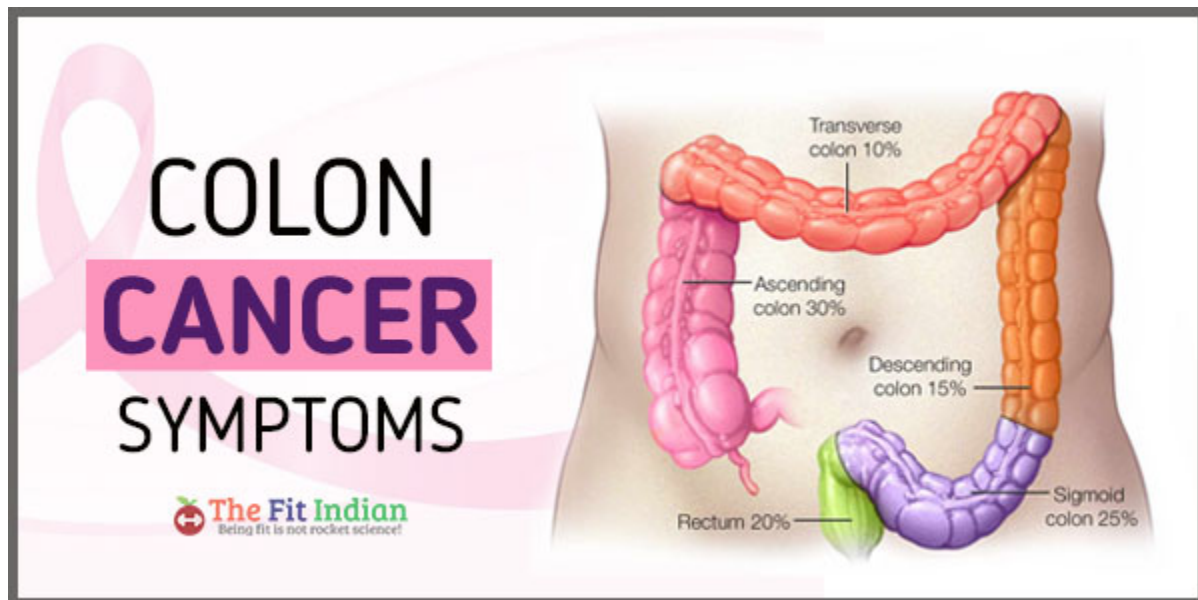


## 7 Dangerous Colon Cancer Symptoms and How to Diagnose – Treatments

Deblina Biswas [Diseases](#), [Treatments](#)

Colon cancer is the most common type of gastrointestinal cancer. It is caused by genetic factors, environmental exposure (including diet), and [inflammatory conditions](#) of the digestive tract. The Big C! Yes, the name cancer is enough to send a chill down the spine. We are all scared of the consequences and the treatment, but cancer can be put into remission if it is caught in the early stages.



So, how do we catch it early before it catches us unawares? The easiest way of doing this is by being more aware of colon cancer symptoms. But first, let us delve deep and find out what colon cancer exactly is.

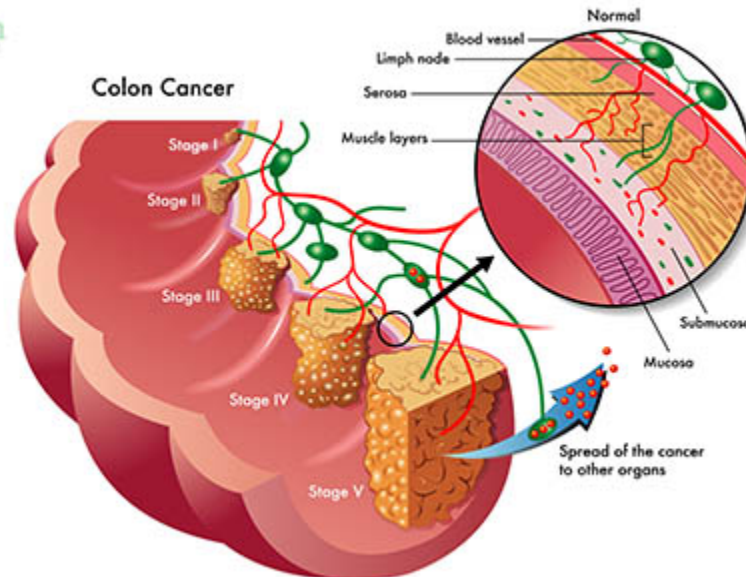
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## What is Colon Cancer?

Colon cancer or colorectal cancer occurs in the colon or rectum. The colon is part of the large intestine or large bowel. The rectum is the link or the passageway that joins the colon to the anus.

Colon cancer, when discovered early, is treatable and can be put into remission or cured, even if it spreads into the surrounding lymph nodes. Surgical treatment is the most preferred option for treatment, followed by chemotherapy.

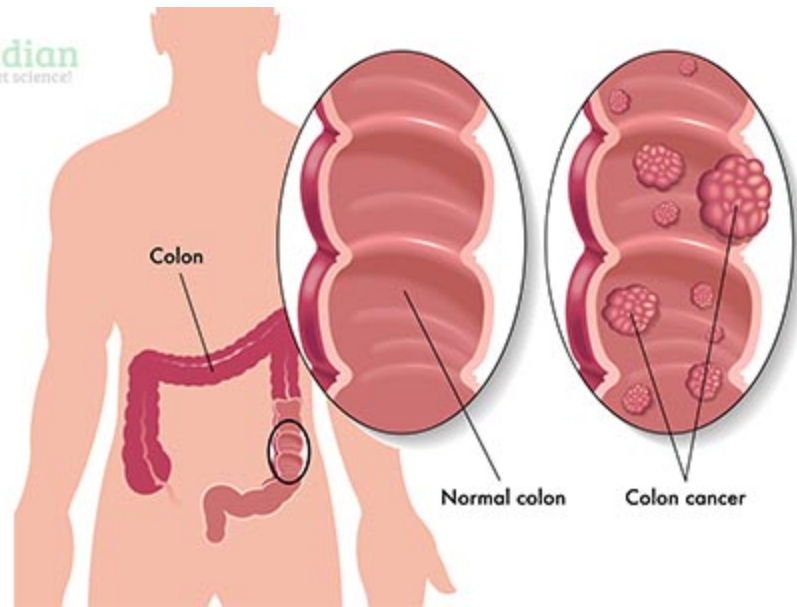


In the most advanced cases — when cancer spreads to the liver, lungs or other sites — surgery becomes the only option for many. It also means extending the patient’s lifespan and improving one’s quality of life. More and more research is being done to know more about this disease, which provides hope for people fighting it, irrespective of the stage they’re suffering from.

Most colorectal cancers originate first as polyps, unusual growths found inside the colon or rectum that may later become malignant if not removed at the right time.

## Whom does the Disease Affect Most?

Colon cancer strikes men and women of most racial and ethnic groups, and is most commonly found in people who are older, above 50 years of age. Nowadays however, much younger people are also being affected by this deadly disease.



This disease, unfortunately, kills more than 50,000 people every year. But these statistics can change if we pay attention to the signs of colon cancer and also change our lifestyle for the better.

## What Causes Colon Cancer?

While it is impossible to put a finger on one single cause of colon cancer, there are certain factors that can be attributed to the risk of developing the disease.

These factors are genetics, health, and diet. Individuals who have had a family history of colon cancer, especially people who have more than one relative affected by the disease, are at increased risk.

Also, two genetic syndromes, the lynch syndrome and familial adenomatous polyposis; have been linked with colon cancer.



A diet high in fat and red meat, can double your risk of developing the disease. It has been found that colon cancer is rare in places where red meat is not an integral part of the diet, especially in people hailing from Japan. But even that is changing now, owing to the fact that the diets of all countries are becoming westernized. Apart from diet, heavy drinking coupled with smoking, may increase the chances of colon cancer. Other [health factors such as obesity and diabetes](#), combined with a lack of physical activity up the risk of the disease.

Also, inflammatory conditions such as ulcerative colitis and other kinds of cancer can increase the risk of developing colon cancer.

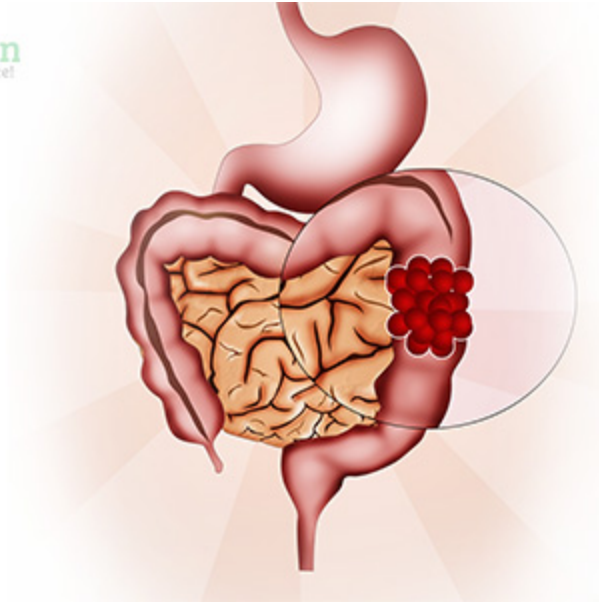
These risk factors, however, do not mean that you will absolutely suffer from colon cancer. As with the other kinds of cancers, colon cancer develops from a combination of a myriad of factors. It goes without saying, that no two individuals are the same, so what caused cancer in one may not cause it in someone else.

## Symptoms of Colon Cancer

Catch the symptoms early, to give yourself a better chance of living a quality life even when you are diagnosed with colon cancer. Signs and symptoms of colon cancer include:



- A sudden change in your bowel movements, which includes diarrhea or constipation, change in the consistency of the stool. If the symptoms last longer than four weeks, then it deserves that walk to the doctor's chamber.
- Blood in your stool or rectal bleeding.
- A feeling that you haven't been able to empty your bowel completely.
- Unremitting abdominal discomforts, such as flatulence, cramps or pain.
- A feeling of weakness or fatigue.
- Unexplained and [sudden weight loss](#).
- Many people with colon cancer probably will experience no symptoms in the initial stages of the disease. When symptoms are more pronounced, they are likely to vary; it depends on how far your cancer has spread and the location of the cancer in your large intestine.



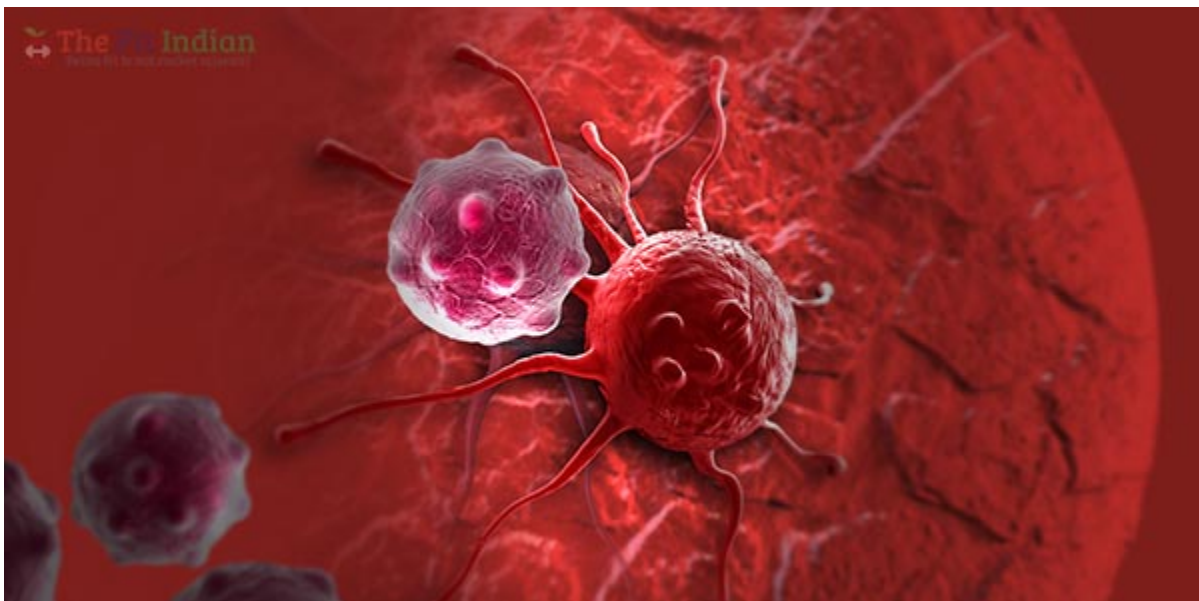
Consult your doctor to know when you should start screening for colon cancer. Guidelines generally say that colon cancer screenings should begin at age 50. Your doctor may even recommend recurrent or earlier screenings if you are at risk and have a genetic mutation.

Adenocarcinomas constitute about 95 percent of all colon cancer cases. They develop in the gastrointestinal tract, especially in the cells of the lining of the colon and/or the rectum.

They usually start as a growth of tissue known as a polyp. A particular type of polyp known as an adenoma may proliferate into cancer. Polyps are thus removed during the time of a routine colonoscopy before they finally grow into cancer.

Some of these polyps may develop into colon cancers over a period of time if they are not taken out during colonoscopy. Colonoscopy is a procedure which looks at the inner lining of the intestine.

Colon cancer cells invade and destroy the healthy tissue close to the tumor, giving rise to complications.



Once the malignant tumors form, the cancerous cells tend to travel through the blood and lymph systems, spreading their tentacles to different parts of the body.

These cancer cells can proliferate in several places, annihilating other healthy tissues throughout the body.

This process is known as metastasis, and is pretty difficult to treat, as it affects more than one part of the body.

Colon cancer and rectal cancer are not one and the same, though they are often spoken of in the same breath.

They do, however, often occur together in what is called colorectal cancer. Rectal cancer, as the name suggests, originates in the rectum, the last several inches of the large intestine, the place closest to the anus.

## Diagnosis of colon cancer

Physicians will first ask for a complete physical examination as well as the medical history of your family. [A cancer diagnosis](#) is made, after the physician conducts several tests like a colonoscopy or a barium enema x-ray.

What is a colonoscopy, you ask? It is a procedure where a long, flexible tube with a camera fixed on one end is inserted right into the rectum to inspect the colon thoroughly.



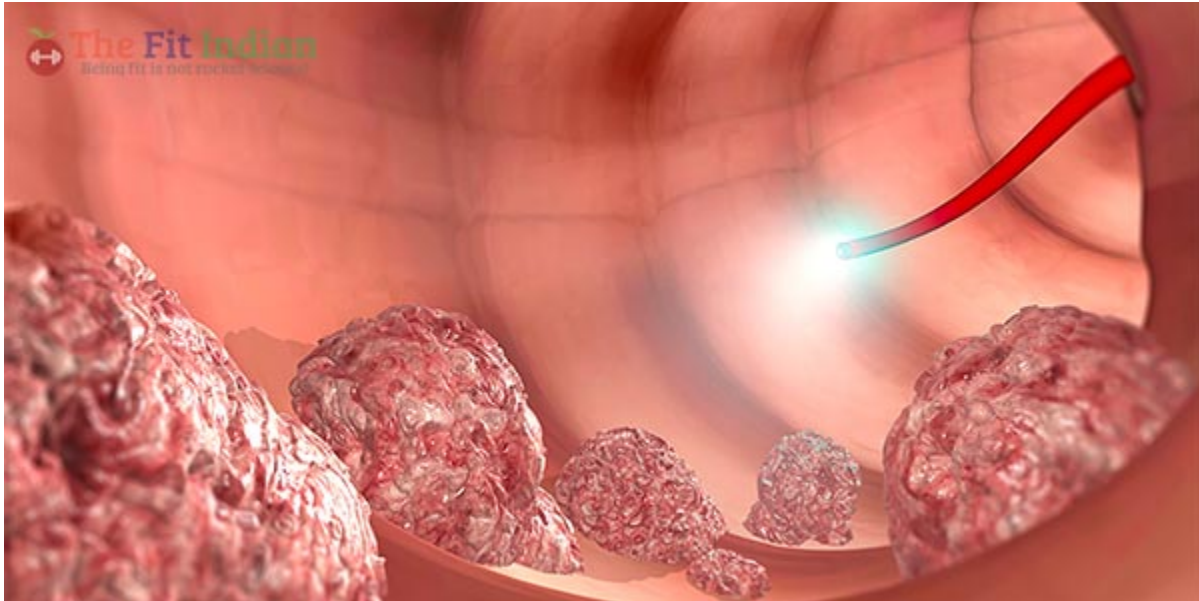
After a thorough investigation, if polyps are found in the colon, they are promptly removed and immediately sent to a pathologist for biopsy. A biopsy is an examination carried out under a microscope that detects pre-cancerous and cancerous cells.

A barium enema is a procedure in which Barium, a liquid solution, is injected into the colon via the rectum. Once the barium is injected, it lines the large intestine, post which an X-ray of the colon and rectum is done. On the X-ray, the barium will appear white and the tumors and polyps will appear as dark outlines.

If, after the initial screening, a colon cancer diagnosis is made, doctors will order a further battery of tests like chest x-rays, ultrasounds, or CT scans of the liver, lungs, and abdomen to analyze and see how far the cancer has metastasized. Another blood test advised by most doctors is CEA (carcinoembryonic antigen). This is to see if a substance produced by some cancer cells is present.

## Treatment of Colon Cancer

The treatment of colon cancer vary according to the various stages. For early stage cancer, when your cancer has not spread much, your doctor will recommend:



- **Minimally invasive surgery-** A minimally invasive approach to surgery, such as taking out the polyps at the time of colonoscopy. If your cancer has not spread much, your doctor will remove the polyps.
- **Removal of larger polyps-** When your surgeon removes larger polyps, he may also have to remove a small amount of the lining of the colon as well, this is known as endoscopic mucosal resection.
- **Minimally invasive surgery-** Some polyps cannot be removed at the time of colonoscopy and can be removed only by the help of laparoscopic surgery. In this procedure, only small incisions in your abdominal wall are made. Through this incision, a tube with a camera attached is sent in, to show the whole colon on a monitor. The oncologist may also need to take samples from the nearby lymph nodes, where the cancer is located.

## Surgery for invasive colon cancer

This is the next stage, when the cancer may have spread into your entire colon. The plan of action by your surgeon will probably be as follows:



- **Partial colectomy-** During this procedure, the surgeon makes sure that he removes the part of your colon that is malignant, along with some parts of normal tissue surrounding the part affected by cancer. Your surgeon may be able to reconnect the healthy portions of your colon or rectum.
- **Surgery-** You definitely will need surgery to create a way for waste to be eliminated from your body.

When it's impossible for your surgeon to reconnect the healthy portions of your colon or rectum, you may then need to have a temporary or permanent colostomy.

This is a way in which an opening in the wall of your abdomen is created, from a portion of the remaining bowel, like a pouch or a bag, to enable elimination of body waste.

Sometimes the colostomy may be just temporary, just allowing your colon or rectum enough time to heal after surgery. But in some cases, the colostomy will be permanent.





- **Removal of lymph nodes-** The lymph nodes surrounding the area affected by cancer are usually removed at the time of colon cancer surgery and tested for cancer.

If your cancer is really in the advanced stages and you are not in very good health, your surgeon may suggest surgery to remove the blockage to improve your quality of life and reduce bleeding and pain.

But, in cases where cancer has metastasized only to the liver and if your overall health is stable, your surgeon may suggest surgery to eliminate the cancerous lesion from your liver.

Chemotherapy can be used as a treatment afterward. This treatment helps improve the prognosis.

## Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is a kind of treatment where drugs are used to annihilate the cancer cells. Chemotherapy is usually given in colon cancer after surgery if cancer has affected the lymph nodes.



This way, chemotherapy helps reduce the risk of recurrence of cancer. Chemotherapy is also used prior to the surgery to shrink the tumors, to make the process of surgery easier.

For people suffering from rectal cancer, chemotherapy is generally used along with radiation therapy.

## Radiation therapy

Radiation therapy is a procedure where powerful energy sources are utilized, like X-rays, on cancer cells that remain even after surgery; radiation helps shrink large tumors before an operation so that they can be removed with ease.

Radiation therapy is not often used in early-stage colon cancer, but is a routine procedure if it is treating rectal cancer, especially if the disease has penetrated through the wall of the rectum or affected the nearby lymph nodes.



Radiation therapy not only helps remove cancer cells, but also reduces the chances of its recurrence. As soon as you suspect there is something wrong with your health, once you understand the signs and symptoms of colon cancer, make sure you do not delay treatment. Cancer is very much treatable if caught in the early stages. So, it is essential that you embrace a healthier lifestyle; this, we believe is your only powerful weapon to combat a deadly disease like cancer!

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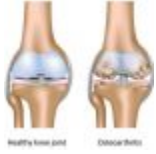
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