

Colorectal Cancer: Are You at Risk?

You have successfully been treated for cancer during childhood or adolescence and are now moving forward with your life—so the last thing you want to be reminded about is the risk of developing another cancer during adulthood. For a variety of reasons, the risk of cancer increases for everyone as they age. Depending on the specific treatment you received for childhood cancer, you may be at increased risk for developing colorectal cancer (cancer of the colon or rectum). It is important to understand that risk, so that you can take steps to protect your health.

What is colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer is a type of cancer that occurs in the colon (large intestine) or the rectum (the last several inches of the large intestine). Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States. Many of these deaths happen because the cancers are found too late to be cured. If colorectal cancer is found early enough, it can usually be cured.

What are the risk factors?

Several studies have shown that people who were treated with radiation to the abdomen, pelvis, spine, or total body (TBI) during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood have an increased risk of developing colorectal cancer. It is therefore important for you to obtain your radiation treatment records so that you know what radiation you received.

Other known risk factors for developing colorectal cancer include:

- Having had colorectal cancer or large intestinal polyps in the past
- Having a close relative (brother, sister, parent or child) who has had colorectal cancer before age 60
- Having ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease
- Having a hereditary colon cancer syndrome (such as familial adenomatous polyposis)

What are the signs of colorectal cancer?

Most colorectal cancers begin as a polyp. A polyp starts as a small, harmless growth in the wall of the colon or rectum. However, as a polyp gets larger, it can develop into a cancer that grows and spreads. During the early stage of colorectal cancer, there are rarely any outward signs or symptoms to alert you or your healthcare provider that cancer is present. This is why screening is so important. Once the cancer has become more advanced, the following signs may be evident. If you have any of these signs, you should see your healthcare provider immediately:

- Bleeding from your rectum
- Blood in your stool or in the toilet after you have a bowel movement
- A change in the shape of your stool
- Cramping pain in your lower stomach
- A feeling of discomfort or an urge to have a bowel movement when there is no need to have one
- A change in the normal frequency of your bowel movements

Other conditions can cause these same symptoms. You should be evaluated by your healthcare provider to find out the reason for your symptoms.

When is colorectal cancer likely to occur?

In the general population, colorectal cancer is most likely to occur between the ages of 45 and 65. In cancer survivors who were treated with abdominal, pelvic, spinal, or total body (TBI) radiation, it may occur earlier. The risk begins to increase around 10 years after the radiation.

What can I do to protect my health?

Most people who received radiation therapy to the abdomen, pelvis, spine, or total body (TBI) will **not** develop colorectal cancer. However, if you received this type of radiation, it is important to understand that the risk **is** higher for you than it is for other people your age who never received radiation. So, the best way for you to protect your health is by taking steps to closely monitor your colon. That way, if a cancer develops, it can be detected in its earliest stages, when treatment is most effective.

What monitoring is recommended?

If you were treated with radiation therapy to the abdomen, pelvis, spine, or total body (TBI) during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood, you should be screened for colorectal cancer beginning 5 years after radiation or at age 30, whichever occurs last. You should talk with your healthcare provider about which screening option is best for you. These options include stool-based testing every three years or colonoscopy every five years.

What is stool-based testing?

If you choose stool-based testing, you will need to provide a stool sample, which will be sent to a laboratory to check for signs of colorectal cancer.

What is a colonoscopy?

Before you have this test, you will be given a medicine to make you feel relaxed and sleepy. A thin, flexible tube connected to a video camera is then inserted into your rectum and slowly guided into your colon. The doctor is able to examine your entire colon, and any polyps or growths can be removed through the tube during the exam. Colonoscopy may be uncomfortable, but it is usually not painful.

Is there anything else that I can do to minimize the risk?

Yes, most definitely! Studies have shown that the following lifestyle changes reduce the risk of colorectal cancer and will help you stay as healthy as possible:

- Eat a variety of healthful foods, with an emphasis on grains, fruits and vegetables.
 - Eat five or more servings of a variety of vegetables and fruits each day.
 - Choose whole grains in preference to processed (refined) grains and sugars.
 - Limit consumption of red meats, especially processed meats (such as hot dogs or bologna) and those high in fat.
 - Choose foods that maintain a healthy weight.

- Adopt a physically active lifestyle.
 - Engage in at least moderate physical activity (such as brisk walking) for 30 minutes or more on five or more days of the week.
 - Engaging in 45 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous activity (activities such as running, in which you are not able to carry on a conversation without needing to catch your breath) on five or more days per week may further reduce your risk of colorectal cancer.

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Additional health information for childhood cancer survivors is available at www.survivorshipguidelines.org

Note: Throughout this *Health Links* series, the term “childhood cancer” is used to designate pediatric cancers that may occur during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood. Health Links are designed to provide health information for survivors of pediatric cancer, regardless of whether the cancer occurred during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood.

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