



Colorectal Cancer Screening **By Lee Mantini RN, MHScN**

The Canadian Cancer Society states that every *week* around 400 Canadians are diagnosed with colorectal cancer and this number continues to increase. One in 14 men and one in 16 women are expected to develop colorectal cancer in their lifetime. Of those diagnosed, one in 28 men and one in 31 women will die as a result of colorectal cancer.

Let's put this into perspective. If the County held a tractor auction and 400 men showed up, that would mean about 28 of the men at the event would be expected to develop colorectal cancer in their lifetime. If there was an outdoor women's music festival and 500 women showed up, approximately 31 of the women would be expected to develop colorectal cancer in their lifetime. On average, one man and one woman attending these events will die of colorectal cancer.

Reading about our bowels isn't the most pleasant of topics but it is an important health topic none the less. Our digestive system has both a small and large bowel. The colon and rectum make up the large bowel, also known as the colorectal area. This is where most bowel cancers occur. Once food leaves the stomach it flows through the small bowel where nutrients are absorbed into the body. The digested food then moves through about 5 to 6 feet of colon where water is absorbed. The solid matter is then held in the rectum until passed through the anus as a bowel movement.

The Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada explains that you are at increased risk of developing colorectal cancer if you are 50 years of age or older, have a personal history of colorectal polyps, a family history of colorectal polyps or cancer, or have Ulcerative Colitis or Crohn's disease. Irritable bowel syndrome is not a risk factor. Women who have a history of ovarian, endometrial or breast cancer are at greater risk. Smoking, drinking alcohol and obesity are risk factors as well. Diet and exercise play a role in preventing this disease so it is important to exercise regularly, maintain a healthy weight, and eat a diet low in red meat and high in fibre, calcium, fruits and vegetables.

Colorectal cancer is most effectively treated in the early stages when there are no symptoms, so early detection is really important. Often the first sign of potential trouble is the development of a polyp in the colon or rectum. A polyp is an abnormal growth of cells. Not all polyps are dangerous, however, some polyps can turn into cancer. Cancerous polyps tend to bleed easily and if left untreated can spread through the wall of the bowel into other parts of the body.

Warning signs to watch for include:

- New onset of diarrhea or constipation lasting longer than a few days
- Rectal bleeding or blood in bowel movements – stools may appear red or black
- Stools that are narrower in diameter
- Feeling like you are not emptying your bowels completely
- Constant abdominal bloating, fullness and cramps
- Unexplained weight loss, ongoing tiredness or anemia

There are many ways to screen for colorectal cancer including: rectal exam, barium enema, stool samples and colonoscopy. When having a colonoscopy, a medicine is given to help the patient relax and minimize any discomfort. The doctor inserts a long, thin, flexible tube, called a colonoscope, through the anus into the rectum and colon. The scope sends images to a monitor where the doctor can see if there are any abnormalities or polyps. If a polyp is found, it is removed immediately and tissue samples will be taken from other areas of concern, to test for cancer and other diseases. Treatment of colorectal cancer may include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, or a combination of these treatments.

If you are 50 years of age or older please talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner about regular colorectal cancer screening. For more information about Colorectal Cancer you are encouraged to read the *Companion and Reference Guide for People Living with Colorectal Cancer*, which can be found at: <http://www.colorectal-cancer.ca/IMG/pdf/ColonCancerEng.pdf>

Information Sources:

Canadian Cancer Society <http://www.cancer.ca>

Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada <http://www.colorectal-cancer.ca/>

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