Important Facts You Should Know About Colorectal Cancer

What is Colorectal Cancer?
Colorectal cancer refers to abnormal cell growth that develops in the colon (lower portion of the large intestine) or the rectum (last few inches of the intestine closest to the anus). Colorectal cancer usually begins as polyps that develop in the inner lining of the large intestine.

- In 2009, 106,100 cases of colon cancer and 40,870 cases of rectal cancer were diagnosed in the United States.
- In that same year, 49,920 Americans died from colon and rectal cancer combined.
- It is estimated that 1 out of 19 people over the age of 50 will develop colorectal cancer.
- The occurrence of colorectal cancer in the Kentucky River Area Development District (Breathitt, Knott, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Perry, Owsley and Wolfe counties) is higher than the national rate.
- There are things that you can do to reduce your risk of developing colorectal cancer.

Who Gets Colorectal Cancer?
It is nearly impossible to predict who will get colorectal cancer, but there are some contributing factors that could increase your risk, such as diet, weight, exercise, and family history.

Watch What You Eat!
Studies have linked meats high in fat content and red meats like beef to colorectal cancer. Processed meats like bologna and bacon may also contribute to these cancers. Bleached flour and processed sugar have been linked to colorectal cancer as well.

It is recommended to increase your daily intake of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Foods high in fiber promote good digestive health. Changing your eating habits to include more fruits and vegetables and whole grains, combined with avoiding or removing red meats and sweet desserts from your diet, is a great way to reduce your risk of colorectal cancer.

Watch Your Weight!
Colorectal cancer is more common in people who are overweight, so it is important to maintain a weight appropriate for your height and age. This type of cancer is less common in people who exercise regularly (30 minutes or more per day at least 5 days per week). Regular exercise and modifying your diet as suggested above should help with weight maintenance. In addition to lowering your risk for colorectal cancer, maintaining a healthy weight provides many other health benefits such as lower risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

What is the Role of Family History?
If you have had a close family member (parent, brother, sister, child) diagnosed with colorectal cancer, you may be at greater risk of developing it as well. Always discuss your family history with your healthcare provider to determine the most appropriate screening schedule for you. If you have been diagnosed with Ulcerative Colitis or Crohn’s Disease you should discuss the need for more frequent screenings with your doctor.
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How is Colorectal Cancer Detected?
Routine screening for colorectal cancer is very important for early detection. When polyps or growths are found early they can be removed before they turn into cancer. If cancer is found in the earlier stages it is more likely to be cured. There are screening techniques that can detect polyps and cancer such as Sigmoidoscopy and Colonoscopy. Talk with your healthcare provider to determine which test is most appropriate for you and when you should consider having the screening.

Sigmoidoscopy involves inserting a thin flexible tube into the intestine which allows the doctor to look for polyps or cancer in the rectum and part of the colon.
Colonoscopy is similar to the previous procedure, but uses a longer tube to allow the doctor to see the entire colon.

Both of these procedures may be uncomfortable, but should not be painful. Sedation (medication to help you sleep) may be used. If polyps are found during either of these procedures the doctor will be able to remove them during the procedure. If other abnormalities are found biopsies may be taken. These procedures are not only beneficial in diagnosing colorectal cancer, but can be useful in treatment and prevention.

Colorectal cancer can be treated and cured. The earlier it is detected the better the chances of a cure. If you are diagnosed with colon cancer discuss all treatment options with your healthcare provider. Treatment options include surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy.

Suggestions for a Healthy Colon
The following suggestions could greatly reduce your risks of developing colorectal cancer:

- Reduce or eliminate red meats and processed meats from your diet.
- Eat 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables everyday.
- Replace bleached flour and processed sugar with whole grains.
- Exercise 30 minutes or more at least 5 days per week.
- Watch your weight.
- Discuss your family history with your doctor.
- Discuss screening with your doctor.

Need More Information?
The Rural Cancer Prevention Center can help you find a healthcare provider who can provide colorectal cancer screenings. Please contact us at http://www.mc.uky.edu/ruralhealth/rcpc.asp or call toll-free (866) 686-7272.