

# Colon and Rectal Cancer

The National Cancer Institute (<http://www.cancer.gov/>), lists colon and rectal cancer as one of 13 common causes of cancer and provides the following information.

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## Understanding Cancer

Cancer begins in cells, the building blocks that make up *tissues*. Tissues make up the organs of the body. Normally, cells grow and divide to form new cells as the body needs them. When cells grow old, they die, and new cells take their place.

Sometimes this orderly process goes wrong. New cells form when the body does not need them, and old cells do not die when they should. These extra cells can form a mass of tissue called a growth or *tumor*.

Not all tumors are cancer. Tumors can be *benign* or *malignant*.

**Benign tumors** are not cancer:

- Benign tumors are rarely life-threatening.
- Usually, benign tumors can be removed, and they seldom grow back.
- Cells from benign tumors do not spread to tissues around them or to other parts of the body.

**Malignant tumors** are cancer:

- Malignant tumors generally are more serious than benign tumors. They may be life-threatening.
- Malignant tumors often can be removed, but they can grow back.
- Cells from malignant tumors can invade and damage nearby tissues and organs. Also, cancer cells can break away from a malignant tumor and enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system. That is how cancer cells spread from the original cancer (*primary tumor*) to form new tumors in other organs. The spread of cancer is called *metastasis*.

## Colon and Rectal Cancer

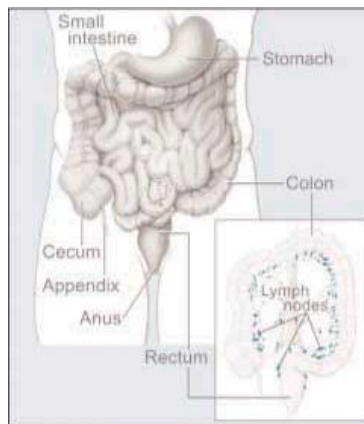
*Cancer* of the *colon* or *rectum* is also called *colorectal* cancer. In the United States, colorectal cancer is the fourth most common cancer in men, after skin, prostate, and lung cancer. It is also the fourth most common cancer in women, after skin, lung, and *breast* cancer.

This National Cancer Institute (NCI) booklet (NIH Publication No. 03-1552) has important information about the possible causes, *symptoms*, diagnosis, and treatment of colorectal cancer. It also has information to help patients cope with the disease.

## The Colon and Rectum

The colon and rectum are parts of the *digestive system*. They form a long, muscular tube called the *large intestine* (also called the large bowel). The colon is the first 4 to 5 feet of the large intestine, and the rectum is the last 4 to 5 inches. The part of the colon that joins to the rectum is the *sigmoid colon*. The part that joins to the *small intestine* is the *cecum*.

Partly digested food enters the colon from the small intestine. The colon removes water and nutrients from the food and stores the rest as waste. The waste passes from the colon into the rectum and then out of the body through the anus.



This picture shows the colon and rectum.

## Colorectal Cancer

Cancer that begins in the colon is called colon cancer, and cancer that begins in the rectum is called rectal cancer. Cancers affecting either of these organs may also be called colorectal cancer.

When colorectal cancer spreads outside the colon or rectum, cancer cells are often found in nearby lymph nodes. If cancer cells have reached these nodes, they may also have spread to other lymph nodes, the liver, or other organs.

When cancer spreads (metastasizes) from its original place to another part of the body, the new tumor has the same kind of abnormal cells and the same name as the primary tumor. For example, if colorectal cancer spreads to the liver, the cancer cells in the liver are actually colorectal cancer cells. The disease is metastatic colorectal cancer, not liver cancer. It is treated as colorectal cancer, not liver cancer. Doctors sometimes call the new tumor "distant" or metastatic disease.

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