



# TAKE CHARGE of your HEALTH

## Colon Cancer

Colon cancer. It's an uncomfortable topic of conversation. With March being Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, it's the perfect opportunity to discuss a topic that many would rather avoid.

Colorectal cancer, which includes cancer of the colon and rectum, is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States. In 2013, more than 136,000 people were diagnosed with colon cancer.

It is the third most common cancer. Though researchers are unclear why, it is also more deadly to the African American population. Colorectal cancer is expected to take the lives of more than 7,000 African Americans in 2017.

African Americans are about 25 percent more likely than whites to be diagnosed with colorectal cancer and about 50 percent more likely to die from it.

Researchers are unsure why African Americans are more susceptible to colorectal cancer, but many believe one reason is their reluctance to get screened.

"In general, many people do not pursue colon cancer screening," said Rakesh Gupta, M.D., FACG, a Gastroenterologist at Cape Fear Center for Digestive Diseases. "I speak to African American men, and amongst young males in particular, there is reluctance to have a screening test when they have no symptoms."

Colorectal cancer, however, may not cause any symptoms until the disease is advanced. The earlier the disease is detected, the better the outcome.

"Most patients who have colon cancer typically have a polyp that grows over time," Dr. Gupta said. "These polyps do not cause symptoms early on. When the polyps get large or become cancerous, they may cause blockage or a person may have blood in the stool. Before that, the patient may show no symptoms at all."

As with many diseases, a person's risk of developing colorectal cancer is determined by a range of factors. These include genetics, family history, obesity, consumption of red meat, tobacco and alcohol use, and a low fiber diet.

Dr. Gupta adds that those with a history of underlying inflammatory bowel disease, such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's colitis, are also at risk.

More and more research suggests that colon and rectal cancer rates are rising sharply for Americans under 55 years of age.

A recent story from CNN said that someone born in 1990 has twice the risk of colon cancer and four times the risk of rectal cancer than someone born in 1950 had at that same age.

Why the increase in colorectal cancers among younger age groups? Research suggests it is more likely because of lifestyle than of genes.

The rise of obesity has closely mirrored the trends in colorectal cancer. While obesity may not be a direct cause of colorectal cancer, it does share common risks, such as a sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy diet.

According to the American Cancer Society, symptoms of colorectal cancer include:

- A change in bowel habits, such as diarrhea, constipation, or narrowing of the stool, that lasts for more than a few days
- A feeling that you need to have a bowel movement that is not relieved by having one
- Rectal bleeding with bright red blood
- Blood in the stool, which may make the stool look dark
- Cramping or abdominal (belly) pain
- Weakness and fatigue
- Unintended weight loss

The best way to prevent colon cancer is to get screened regularly. The American Cancer Society recommends regular testing for men and women over the age of 50. But Dr. Gupta says that African Americans, especially males, should consider regular screening at age 45.

"Most colorectal cancers begin with colon polyps," said Dr. Gupta. "There is about a 10-year timeframe between the time a normal colon develops polyps and those polyps become cancerous. So there is an opportunity to intervene and intercept and that can only happen if we pursue routine screening."