

## **Common Gastrointestinal Problems**

*A Consumer Health Guide*

# **COLORECTAL CANCER**

### **What is Colorectal Cancer?**

Colorectal cancer is the second most common cancer killer in the United States, causing an estimated 55,000 deaths each year. More than 138,000 new cases of colorectal cancer are diagnosed each year. Men and women are equally affected by this disease.

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the colon and rectum, two parts of the digestive system also known as the large intestine.

Most colon cancers arise from polyps, abnormal growths on the wall of the colon that may become cancerous over time. If polyps are identified at a very early stage, they can be removed before they become cancerous.

Complications of colorectal cancer can be reduced or even prevented with the simple step of regular screening. The screening program recommended by the American Cancer Society includes an annual fecal occult blood test and a screening flexible sigmoidoscopy every 3-5 years for all Americans over the age of 50. Those individuals with a high risk for colorectal cancer because of prior cancer, a family history of cancer, or a history of chronic digestive condition that predisposes them to cancer, should undergo regular surveillance known as colonoscopy. A recent study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* stated that more than 90% of deaths associated with colorectal cancer could be avoided through early detection.

### **Who is At Risk for Colorectal Cancer?**

- ▼ Women are just as likely as men to develop colorectal cancer.
- ▼ Colon cancer is most common after age 50, but the chances of developing this disease increase after age 40.
- ▼ Close relatives of a person who has had colorectal cancer before the age of 55, or persons with one of several chronic digestive conditions have a higher than average risk of developing colorectal cancer.

### **What are the Symptoms of Colorectal Cancer?**

Most early cancers produce no symptoms, which is why screening is so important. Some possible symptoms, listed below, certainly do not always indicate the presence of colorectal cancer, but should prompt a visit with your physician and a check-up.

- ▼ Frequent gas pains
- ▼ Blood in or on the stool
- ▼ Diarrhea or Constipation
- ▼ A feeling that the bowel has not emptied completely

### **REGULAR SCREENING: THE ABSOLUTE BEST PROTECTION AGAINST COLORECTAL CANCER**

### **When Should People be Screened for Colorectal Cancer?**

People over 50 should be screened for colorectal cancer by their physician. Several tests are recommended.

- ▼ An annual fecal occult blood test, which checks for microscopic traces of blood in the stool.
- ▼ A flexible sigmoidoscopy once every 3-5 years to detect colorectal cancer at its earliest and most treatable stage.
- ▼ An annual colonoscopy is recommended for high risk patients of any age with prior history of colorectal cancer, a strong family history of the disease, or a predisposing chronic digestive condition such as inflammatory bowel disease.