

## Rectal Cancer:

Rectal cancer, a type of colorectal cancer, specifically affects the rectum, the last part of the large intestine. Like other forms of cancer, it arises when cells in the rectal lining begin to grow uncontrollably. Early detection is crucial for effective treatment, making awareness and understanding of this disease essential. In this blog, we'll explore the risk factors, symptoms, screening methods, and preventative measures related to rectal cancer.

## What is Rectal Cancer?

Rectal cancer occurs when abnormal cells develop in the rectum. It often starts as polyps—small growths on the rectal lining—that can become cancerous over time. Rectal cancer can spread to nearby lymph nodes and other parts of the body, which is why early diagnosis is so important.

## Risk Factors

Several factors can increase the risk of developing rectal cancer:

1. **Age:** Most cases occur in individuals over 50, although rates among younger adults are rising.
2. **Family History:** A family history of colorectal cancer or polyps can significantly elevate your risk.
3. **Genetic Syndromes:** Conditions like familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) and Lynch syndrome are linked to higher risks of rectal cancer.
4. **Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD):** Conditions like Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis increase the risk of developing rectal cancer.
5. **Lifestyle Factors:** A diet high in red and processed meats, sedentary lifestyle, obesity, smoking, and excessive alcohol consumption are all associated with higher risks.

## Symptoms

In the early stages, rectal cancer may not cause noticeable symptoms, making regular screening vital. As the disease progresses, you may experience:

- Rectal bleeding or blood in the stool
- Changes in bowel habits, such as diarrhea or constipation
- Abdominal or pelvic pain

- Unexplained weight loss
- A feeling of incomplete bowel evacuation
- Narrowing of the stool

If you experience any of these symptoms, it's crucial to consult a healthcare professional.

## Screening and Diagnosis

Regular screening plays a key role in the early detection of rectal cancer. The American Cancer Society recommends that individuals at average risk begin screening at age 45. Common screening methods include:

1. **Colonoscopy:** A procedure that allows doctors to view the entire colon and rectum, enabling them to detect and remove polyps. This is the gold standard for screening and diagnosis.
2. **Stool Tests:** Tests like the fecal stool DNA testing (Cologuard) check for signs of cancer or precancerous conditions.
3. **CT colonography:** this is a radiology test that can sometimes see large polyps and cancer but cannot obtain biopsies to confirm the pathology

Your doctor can help determine the most appropriate screening method based on your individual risk factors.

## Treatment Options

If diagnosed with rectal cancer, treatment will depend on the stage of the disease and the patient's overall health. Common treatment options include:

1. **Surgery:** Surgery involves removing the rectum and surrounding lymph nodes. In some cases, a colostomy or temporary ileostomy may be necessary.
2. **Chemotherapy:** This may be used before or after surgery to try to eliminate any cancer cells in the blood stream or lymphatic system.
3. **Radiation Therapy:** Often used in combination with chemo to help reduce tumor size and minimize the risk of recurrence.
4. **Targeted Therapy:** This involves medications that specifically target cancer cell mechanisms to inhibit their growth. Currently this treatment is limited to a small amount of cancers.

## Prevention

While not all cases of rectal cancer can be prevented, certain lifestyle changes can help reduce your risk:

- **Regular Screening:** Stick to recommended screening schedules based on your risk profile.
- **Healthy Diet:** Focus on a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins while minimizing red and processed meats.
- **Stay Active:** Engage in regular physical activity to maintain a healthy weight and lower risk.
- **Limit Alcohol and Tobacco:** Reducing alcohol consumption and quitting smoking can significantly lower your cancer risk.

## **Conclusion**

Rectal cancer is a serious health concern, but with awareness, early detection, and proactive measures, its impact can be significantly reduced. Regular screenings, a healthy lifestyle, and open communication with healthcare providers are key to preventing and managing this disease. Staying informed about rectal cancer can empower you and those around you to take charge of health. If you have any concerns or symptoms, don't hesitate to seek medical advice.