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Understanding the Cancer of the Colon and the Rectum

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The very word ‘Cancer’ strikes fear into people. What comes to mind is an unconquerable disease with no solution, only stop-gap measures. The truth is that we fear what we do not understand. The first step to conquering cancer is to know about cancer.

The truth about Cancer is that it is not just one disease, but various, depending on the source of its origin. The name is the biggest giveaway such as Brain Cancer, Breast Cancer, among others. Interestingly, the cancer of the Colon and Rectum are grouped together and referred to as Colorectal Cancer, due to the various commonalities between them.

More commonly known as the large intestine, the colon’s function is to absorb water and store the waste products before excretion. The rectum consists of the last inches of the colon, which connects to the anus. Both organs share various commonalities due to similar biology and proximity. However, despite being two parts of the same organ, the cancer of the colon and rectum are vastly different.

Colon cancer can start anywhere along the length of the colon (which is about 5 feet in length) while rectal cancer starts in the rectum, which consists of the last 12 centimeters of the colon. While the colon occupies the space between the lower-end of the ribcage to your pelvis, the rectum resides in a more crowded neighborhood consisting of the bladder and the uterus and vagina for women, or the prostate for men. The location plays an important role when it comes to possible treatment options.

Both colon and rectal cancers share similar symptoms such as stomach pains, constipation, and blood in the stool. The procedure for diagnosis is also similar, with colonoscopy commonly used to check for polyps, a growth of tissues, which may have become cancerous. Non-invasive screening alternatives also exist and consist of a stool DNA test, fecal immunochemical tests, and CT colonography.

As a disease, rectal cancer can be considered more aggressive of the two owing to the fact that the rectum is much shorter than the colon and in a tighter spot in the body, making it potentially easier for the cancer to spread to surrounding tissue. In general, rectal cancer can be more difficult to treat and cure and may recur for as many 55 percent of people.

Surgery is the preferred form of treatment for both colon and rectal cancers which have been detected early. If the colon cancer has spread to the lymph nodes or affects a thick section of the colon, chemotherapy may be the recommended form of treatment. Advanced rectal cancers may require chemotherapy and radiation therapy (not commonly used for colon cancer) in order to reduce the size of the tumor before surgery can be undertaken.

At the end of the day, cancer is a genetic disease that may be inherited from our ancestors, or may develop over the course of one’s lifetime due to exposure to carcinogenic substances. Living a healthy lifestyle that includes no smoking, regular exercise, maintenance of a healthy weight, and a diet that is low in red meat and high in vegetables and fruit is probably your best start at general cancer prevention. Another healthy habit to inculcate would be regular screening, which has the potential to detect cancer in its infancy, when survival rates are highest (going up to 90%). Unfortunately, only 39% are diagnosed in the early stages, partly due to low testing rates. As cancer progresses to more advanced stages, survival rates drop drastically. Thus, along with adopting a healthy lifestyle, a conscious effort to undergo regular screening would go a long way towards leading a healthy, cancer-free life.

- Dr. Sreenivasa D, Gastroenterology, Cytecare Cancer Hospital