

# Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Jul 24, 2020

## Colon and rectal cancer: what is it?

**Cancer in your intestines (bowels) is called colon or rectal cancer. You might also hear it called colorectal cancer. This kind of cancer is serious, but it can often be cured if it's caught early enough.**

**You can use our information to talk to your doctor about the right treatments for you.**

### What is colon and rectal cancer?

Your colon and rectum make up the upper and lower part of your large intestine. Your large intestine turns food your body doesn't need into solid waste. The waste then leaves your body when you go to the bathroom.

Colon and rectal cancer starts when some of the cells in your large intestine begin to grow out of control. This can form a lump called a tumor. Cancer cells can then break off from the tumor and spread to other parts of your body and cause damage there.

### What are the symptoms?

You might not get any symptoms in the early stages of colon or rectal cancer. Some people only find out they have it when they go for a routine screening test. (To learn more, see the leaflet *Colon and rectal cancer: should I be screened?*). But some people do get symptoms. These can include:

- changes in your bowel habits that last for several weeks. For example, you may get diarrhea or become constipated. Or your stools may be thinner than usual. This can happen if the cancer has partly blocked your bowel
- bleeding from your rectum or visible blood in your stools. If you have bleeding in your bowel, you may become anemic. This can make you feel very tired and look pale
- severe pain in your abdomen.

If your doctor thinks you may have colon or rectal cancer, you'll need tests. One of the main tests is called a colonoscopy.

## Colon and rectal cancer: what is it?

During a colonoscopy, a specialist doctor (called a gastroenterologist) puts a tube with a camera on the end (a colonoscope) into your anus and passes it up into your rectum and colon. This allows the doctor to look for problems such as cancer.

If the doctor sees anything unusual during the test, he or she can take a sample of tissue to look at more closely. This is called a biopsy. Other tests you may have include scans, x-rays, and blood tests.

Together, these tests can tell you for certain whether or not you have cancer. If you do have cancer, they can also help your doctor determine how advanced it is.

Your doctor might describe how advanced your cancer is by saying it's at a certain stage. For example:

- stage I bowel cancer means that it hasn't spread very far. This is the easiest stage of bowel cancer to treat
- stage II and III cancers have spread farther than stage I cancer but are usually still treatable
- stage IV (4) bowel cancer is the most advanced and is the hardest stage to treat.

## What will happen to me?

Cancer in your colon or rectum is a serious illness. But many people are cured with treatment. Your doctor will be able to tell you about how many people recover, on average, from the stage and type of cancer you have.

In general, the earlier you were diagnosed and the earlier the stage of your cancer, the better. But, remember, you are not a statistic. No one can say exactly what will happen to you. What we do know in general is that:

- about 95 in 100 people with stage I bowel cancer are still alive five years after being diagnosed
- about 80 in 100 people with stage II bowel cancer are still alive five years after diagnosis
- for stage III bowel cancer, the number varies between about 45 and 85 in 100 people, depending on complications
- stage IV cancer is very hard to treat. Only about 8 in 100 people with stage IV bowel cancer are alive five years after diagnosis.

You'll have regular check-ups after being treated for bowel cancer. This is so your doctor can find out early if your cancer returns.

If you get any symptoms that worry you, don't wait for your next check-up. See your doctor right away.

For more information on treatments for colon and rectal cancer see our leaflet *Colon and rectal cancer: what treatments work?*

## Colon and rectal cancer: what is it?

The patient information from *BMJ Best Practice* is regularly updated. The most recent version of Best Practice can be found at [bestpractice.bmj.com](https://bestpractice.bmj.com). This information is intended for use by health professionals. It is not a substitute for medical advice. It is strongly recommended that you independently verify any interpretation of this material and, if you have a medical problem, see your doctor.

Please see BMJ's full terms of use at: [bmj.com/company/legal-information](https://bmj.com/company/legal-information). BMJ does not make any representations, conditions, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that this material is accurate, complete, up-to-date or fit for any particular purposes.

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2024. All rights reserved.

### What did you think about this patient information guide?

Complete the [online survey](#) or scan the QR code to help us to ensure our content is of the highest quality and relevant for patients. The survey is anonymous and will take around 5 minutes to complete.



**BMJ** Group