

## **COLON CANCER AND COLON CANCER SCREENING**

Contributed by  
Dr. Mike Mills, Gastroenterologist

Cancer of the colon is the third leading cause of cancer related deaths in the Jamaican population in males, behind prostate and lung and behind breast and cervix in females. The Jamaica Cancer Registry reported an incidence of 13 per 100,000 cases locally. Like cervical cancer however, colon cancer can be prevented with screening to detect the pre-cancerous stage in the form of colon polyps. These can then be removed from the colon before cancer forms.

### **Risk factors**

Cancer of the colon affects men and women in roughly equal numbers. It becomes more common the older you become; however there are certain risk factors which predispose someone to developing colon cancer at a higher rate than the average person. These risk factors include a diet high in fat and low in fiber. Also if someone in the family was diagnosed with colon cancer it increases your risk as well. A family or personal history of colon polyps is another risk factor. Less common risk factors include ulcerative colitis.

### **Signs and symptoms**

Signs and symptoms of colon cancer are usually present when the disease is fairly advanced. For this reason it is important not to wait until symptoms start before thinking about colon cancer. Once present symptoms include a change in bowel habit e.g. new onset constipation or persistent diarrhea, blood in the stools or mucous in the stools. Other signs which suggest there may be an underlying cancer are loss of appetite and unintentional weight loss. Unexplained anemia especially in those over 50 years is also a possible sign of colon cancer.

### **Diagnosis**

It is important for you know about cancer of the colon, in particular, because there are things which you can do to actually prevent the development of the disease. Healthy lifestyle choices are important such as quitting smoking and reducing intake of red meat. Apart from this, your doctor can order tests to detect polyps before they become cancer, or detect early stages of cancer to improve your outcome. These tests range from a stool test looking for the presence of blood in the stools (which may not be obvious), to taking a picture of the bowel wall to see if anything is growing in it. The tests available to take a picture of the bowel wall are a barium enema; colonoscopy and CT colonography scan of the colon. All these tests are available locally, and your doctor will decide which test is best for you.

### **Barium Enema**

A Barium enema is an x-ray of the colon or large bowel using contrast to outline the bowel wall. In this way any abnormality in the bowel wall can be picked up. This test is the least expensive of the tests available to detect colon cancer or polyps, but is not the most sensitive, meaning it can miss some cases of especially small growths or those quite low down in the rectum. Another disadvantage of doing a barium enema is that if an abnormality is seen on this test you will usually have to do a colonoscopy afterwards to allow for biopsy of the abnormality.

## **Colonoscopy**

Colonoscopy remains the single best test to diagnose colon cancer or polyps. It is an outpatient procedure and is done usually by trained gastroenterologists or in some instances trained surgeons. It examines the same area of large bowel as the barium enema but is much better at seeing the exact cause of the problem and in addition allows the doctor to either completely remove any polyps before they become cancer at the same time or to do biopsies of any suspicious areas in the bowel wall. A light sedative is always used with colonoscopy making the procedure very comfortable.

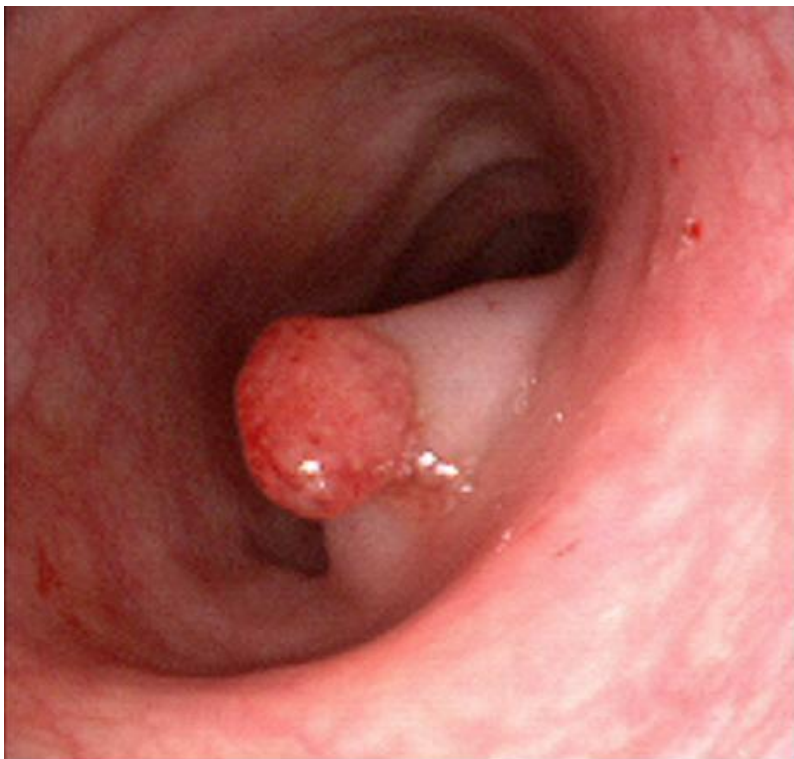
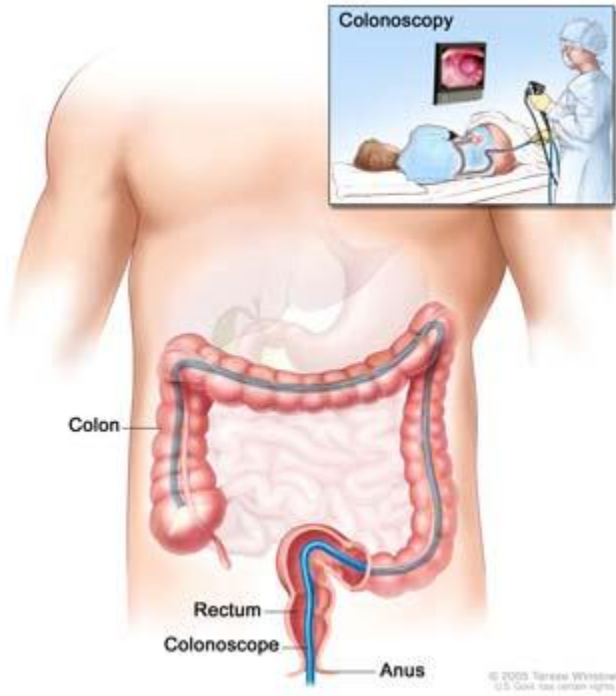
## **CT Colonoscopy**

CT Colonography is another way of looking at the bowel for signs of cancer. It uses computer software to build a 2D or 3D picture of the colon allowing specially trained radiologists or other specialists to pick up polyps or cancer as well. It is far better than a barium enema and at least as good as a colonoscopy but carries the disadvantage of not allowing biopsies. Therefore any abnormal results must again be followed by a colonoscopy.

## **Screening**

It is recommended that everybody who is over the age of 50 years should have a screening test for colon cancer done. This is whether or not you have symptoms or signs of bowel problems. If a relative of yours has had cancer of the bowels it is even more important for you to have a screening test done, and this should be 10 years before your relative was diagnosed or age 40yr. These tests are done as outpatient tests and so you do not have to be admitted to hospital to do them.

Cancer of the colon is quite common locally and the numbers diagnosed each year continue to increase, but the good thing is that by screening tests you can prevent the disease in most cases and catch it early in others. We must do all we can to fight against colon cancer by screening for this potentially preventable disease.



Colon polyp on colonoscopy

