

If You Were See-Through

If you were see-through it would be easier to spot colon cancer. Unfortunately you're not. But the fact of the matter is that Ontario has one of the highest rates of colorectal cancer (also called simply colon cancer) in the world and thousands die from it each year. With screening and early detection however, colorectal cancer has a 90 per cent cure rate.

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in Ontario. It is estimated that 7,800 Ontarians are diagnosed with the disease each year and 3,250 will die.

Colorectal cancer generally develops from tiny growths inside the colon or rectum called polyps. These polyps are not cancerous at first, but some may turn into cancer. Unfortunately there are no physical signs or symptoms during the early stages of colon cancer, but as the disease progresses more obvious symptoms may be present. A change in bowel movements, blood (either red or very dark) in the stool, diarrhea, constipation or feeling that the bowel doesn't completely empty, narrower than usual stools, stomach discomfort, unexplained weight loss or fatigue may be signs of a colorectal problem. If you have any of these symptoms talk to your doctor.

The two most common risk factors are age and family history. Risk increases with the presence of a family member (parent, child or sibling) who has had colorectal cancer. If you are over 50 but don't have a family history, screening should be considered. You can reduce the risk of colon cancer by eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, not smoking and only drinking alcohol in moderation.

A new initiative by the Ontario Government in collaboration with Cancer Care Ontario called "Colon Cancer Check" is a screening program that encourages all adults aged 50 and older to be screened for colon cancer. The *Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT)* is a simple, at home test that detects occult or "invisible" amounts of blood in the stool, which may be a sign of colon cancer.

The *FOBT* involves the collection of two small samples of your stool on three different days. The completed test is then placed in the postage-paid addressed envelope and sent to a laboratory for analysis. *Fecal Occult Blood Tests* are available from your family health care provider to anyone over the age of 50. For anyone without a family physician, *FOBT's* can be obtained from a pharmacist at no cost.

Test results are sent to your primary health care provider. If you do not have a primary health care provider, tests are available through *Telehealth Ontario* or your local pharmacist. If test results are positive, it is not necessarily a positive cancer diagnosis. Only about 10% of those with positive results will actually have cancer. With a positive *FOBT* test your health care provider will recommend a colonoscopy. This test involves inserting a long flexible tube through the rectum and extending it along the length of the colon. A small camera at the end of the tube will help the specialist to examine the colon and remove any polyps if necessary.

With the risk of colon cancer being real, it is important to become informed. *Fecal Occult Blood Testing* should be a regular part of your cancer screening routine. Talk to your primary health care provider about the screening method that is right for you. For more information go to ColonCancerCheck.ca