



# After a Colorectal Cancer Diagnosis



Colorectal cancer starts in the colon or rectum, which are part of your digestive system. During digestion, your colon absorbs water and changes undigested food into solid waste (stool). From there, stool is stored in the rectum until it's passed out of your body during a bowel movement. If you have been told you have colorectal cancer, you've probably already had a colonoscopy, other scans, and a biopsy (a test that takes some tissue to check for cancer). Other tests might have been done on the cancer cells to check for certain proteins and gene changes called biomarkers. You might also have other procedures to find out if the cancer has spread. These tests help your doctor know what type of colorectal cancer you have, what stage it is, and what treatment might help.

## Treatment for colorectal cancer

Your treatment will depend on the type and stage of your colorectal cancer. Your treatment options will also depend on the results of the tests on the cancer cells, your health, and your personal preferences.

Surgery is used to treat most colorectal cancers. This involves removing the cancer along with a part of the normal colon or rectum. Surgery to remove all or part of the colon is called a colectomy and surgery to remove the entire rectum is called a proctectomy.

Some people who have surgery will need an ostomy (colostomy or ileostomy) if their large or small intestine (bowel) isn't working well after surgery. An ostomy is an opening in the belly to allow stool to pass out of the body. Some people need ostomies for several months (temporary), while others will have the ostomy for the rest of their lives (permanent).

Other treatments can include radiation and medicines such as chemo, targeted drug therapy, or immunotherapy. In many cases, more than one type of treatment is needed. Your doctor will help you decide which treatments are best for you.

## Be sure to ask:

- What is the goal of treatment?
- What type of colorectal cancer do I have?
- What stage is my colorectal cancer, and what does that mean? What were the biomarker test results?
- What else have you learned from my test results? Will I need more tests?
- Will I need surgery? Can the cancer be removed completely?
- Will I need an ostomy? How long will I need it? How will I take care of it?
- If my ostomy is temporary, when will it be reversed (removed) and who will reverse it?
- Do I need genetic testing?

## What to expect before and during treatment

Your cancer care team will explain your treatment plan to you. This team may include different doctors, nurses, and other health care workers, depending on the type of treatment you need. If you need surgery, you will work with your surgeon to know what to expect. If you need other types of treatment, your doctor or cancer care team will explain how it is given, help you get ready for it, keep track of how you're doing, and help you with any side effects. You might also get tests at certain times to see how well your treatment is working.

Not everyone going through treatment will have the same side effects. For example, side effects of surgery are different from side effects of chemo, targeted drug therapy, immunotherapy, or radiation treatment. And people getting the same treatment might have different side effects.

### Be sure to ask:

- What are my treatment options? What do you think is best for me and why?
- Are there clinical trials for my cancer?
- What side effects might I have, and what can I do about them?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- How often will I get treatment? How long will it last?
- Where will I go to get treatment? Can I drive myself?
- Will I be able to keep doing my usual activities, like work and exercise?
- Will treatment affect my sex life? How and for how long? What can I do to help this?

## What to expect after treatment

After treatment, ask your cancer doctor for a treatment summary and follow-up plan. This is called a survivorship care plan. Your cancer doctor will work with your family or primary care doctor to help manage side effects from treatment and check your general health. You will have regular tests to check if your cancer has come back, or if a new cancer has started in a different part of your body.

For some people, cancer might not go away completely. They might continue to get treatment, and tests will be needed to see how well it's working.

You might be faced with changes to your body after treatment. Surgery and other treatments may change how your bowels work. You might have sexual problems. Ask your doctor what to expect and let them know if you have any problems.

People who have had colorectal cancer are at risk for having it again or getting certain other types of cancer. Even if you feel fine after finishing treatment, it's important to ask your cancer care team about a regular schedule for follow-up tests to check if your colorectal cancer has come back.

### Be sure to ask:

- Where do I get a copy of my treatment summary and follow-up plan?
- How often do I need to see my cancer care team?
- When and how should I contact them?
- Will I need tests to see if cancer has come back, or to check for problems from treatment?
- Do I need any screening tests, like a mammogram, to find other cancers early?
- Are there late or long-term side effects from treatment that I should watch for?
- Who can help me with my ostomy, if I have one?
- Where can I find my medical records?

## Staying healthy

Be sure to tell your doctor or cancer care team if any treatment side effects don't go away or if you have any new symptoms.

There are things you can do to keep yourself healthy during and after treatment. Not smoking can help lower your chance of getting another cancer. Getting to and staying at a healthy weight, eating well, being active, and avoiding alcohol can also help you stay healthy and lower your risk of getting a new colorectal cancer or other cancers.

You might want to reach out to friends, family, or religious leaders or groups. Counseling can also help. Some people find it helpful to talk with others who've been through the same things. A support group can offer that. Tell your cancer care team how you're feeling. They can help you find the right support.



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at [cancer.org/coloncancer](https://cancer.org/coloncancer) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

## Dealing with your feelings

Having colorectal cancer might make you feel scared, sad, or nervous. It's normal to have these feelings, and there are ways to help you cope.

- Don't try to deal with your feelings by yourself. Talk about your feelings, no matter what they are.
- It's OK to feel sad or down once in a while, but let your cancer care team know if you have these feelings for more than a few days.
- If your doctor says it's OK, do things you enjoy like spending time outdoors, going to a movie or sporting event, or going out to dinner.
- Get help with tasks like cooking and cleaning.