



# After a Colorectal Cancer Diagnosis

If you have been told you have colon or rectal cancer, also called colorectal cancer, you have probably already had a colonoscopy, other scans, and a biopsy (a test that takes some tissue to check for cancer). Other tests may be done on the cancer cells to check for certain proteins and gene changes. You might also have scans or procedures to find out if the cancer has spread. These tests help your doctor know what type of colorectal cancer you have, including where it is in your colon or rectum, what stage it is, and what treatment might help.

There are many ways to treat colorectal cancer, including surgery, radiation therapy, and medicines such as chemo, targeted drug therapy, or immunotherapy. Many times, more than one type of treatment is needed. Treatment mostly depends on things like the type, stage, and location of your colorectal cancer. Your treatment choices also depend on the results of the tests on the cancer cells, health problems you might have, and your personal choices. Your doctor will help you decide which treatments are best for you.

## Be sure to ask:

- What type of colorectal cancer do I have?
- What stage is my colorectal cancer, and what does that mean?
- What else have you learned about my colorectal cancer from my test results?
- Will I need more tests?
- What treatments do you think are best for my colorectal cancer?
- What are the likely side effects of treatment?

## What to expect 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.

For example, most people with colorectal cancer will need surgery. If you do, you will work with your surgeon and cancer care team to know what to expect before and after the operation. 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). If you need an ostomy, specially trained health care workers will teach you how to care for it. They will also help you get the supplies you need.

If you need other types of treatment, your doctor or cancer 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 blood tests, x-rays, or scans at certain times to see how well your treatment is working.

Not everyone going through treatment for colorectal cancer will have the same side effects. For example, the side effects of surgery are different from the side effects of chemo, targeted drug therapy, immunotherapy, or radiation treatments. 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?
- What is the goal of treatment?
- What side effects might I have, and what can I do about them?
- Will the treatment change how my bowels work?
- Will I need a colostomy or ileostomy? How long will I need it?
- If I do need an ostomy, who will teach me how to take care of it?
- If my colostomy or ileostomy is temporary, when will it be reversed (removed) and who will reverse it?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- How often will I get treatment, and how long will it last?
- Where will I go to get treatment, and can I drive myself?
- Will I be able to keep doing my usual activities, like work, exercise, and having sex?

### What to expect after treatment

After treatment, your cancer care team will help you deal with any side effects you might still have. You will also have regular tests to check if your cancer has come back, or to check if a new cancer has started in a different part of your body.

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

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

You might also have a hard time coping with changes to your body after treatment. For example, your bowels may not work the same way they did before. If you have a colostomy or ileostomy, find out what you can do to deal with having it. Some people who have certain types of surgery for colorectal cancer may also have sexual problems. Talk to your cancer care team about how to manage any problems you have.

Even if you've finished treatment and may feel fine, it is important to ask your cancer care team about a regular schedule for follow-up tests. These tests check to see if you have new polyps or if your colorectal cancer has come back.

### Be sure to ask:

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

### Staying healthy

There are things you can do to keep yourself healthy during and after treatment for colorectal cancer. Eating well, being active, getting to and staying at a healthy weight, not smoking, and avoiding alcohol can help you. Some of these things might also help lower your risk of getting a new colorectal cancer or other cancers.

Remember to get screened for other kinds of cancers, and continue getting checked for other health problems. Talk to your doctor about the screening and testing plan that's right for you.

## Dealing with your feelings

Having colorectal cancer might make you feel scared, sad, or nervous. You might also have a hard time coping with changes to your body after treatment. It is normal to have these feelings, and there are ways to help you cope with them.

- 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 health care team know if you feel this way for more than a few days.

- Do things you enjoy like going to a movie, out to dinner, spending time outdoors, or to a sporting event, if your doctor says it's OK.
- Get help with tasks like cooking and cleaning.

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

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

