

# Colorectal Cancer Awareness

**By Sheri Pope**

Colorectal cancer is increasing in younger adults. It is unclear why, but experts believe it could be a diet of low-fiber overprocessed food, obesity and sedentary lifestyles. An increase in inflammation and environmental toxins are also suspected reasons for the increase. There is a 1% decrease in older adults dying of colon cancer, likely due to the increase in screening.

Understanding and decreasing risk factors can lead to a healthier colon. A risk factor is anything that raises the chances of developing a disease like cancer. Age, family history, dietary factors and tobacco use are common risk factors for colon cancer. A compromised immune system and hereditary syndromes also increase the risk of developing colorectal cancer. About 35% of cancer patients have family history of colorectal cancer and about 7% are caused by inherited genetic mutations.

Long-term human studies are needed, but evidence from introductory findings suggests vaping may increase the risk of colon cancer. Certain chemicals in vape products, including those also found in antifreeze, promote cancer cell growth and progression. Vaping the aerosols has shown DNA damage, increased cancer stem cell markers and tobacco use, in general, can change the colon's lining.

Over 1,000 species of microorganisms live in the human intestine. They help maintain gut health and protect our bodies from pathogens and foreign microorganisms that cause disease in the body. When the gut is not healthy it can affect development of colorectal cancer, progression and successful treatment.

Balanced gut microbiome is supported by a healthy diet, exercise and sleep. Eating a healthy diet, like fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds, fermented foods and minimizing sugar and processed foods can help. Fermented foods include yogurt, sauerkraut, kimchi and sourdough bread. They contain probiotics that add good bacteria to the gut. Taking antibiotics only when prescribed is also helpful. With long-term use they can kill the good bacteria that lives in your stomach.

Maintaining a few healthy habits like staying hydrated, setting a goal of 7-9 hours of sleep each night and regular exercise can also help support the gut microbiome. Stress can negatively affect the gut. Activities like meditation, journaling and yoga can help to decrease your stress levels.

Ready to screen for colorectal cancer? There are several options to choose from. Fecal Immunochemical Tests, or FIT test and Cologuard are take-home tests. There is a new blood test, Shield, that might suit some patients with average risk. A colonoscopy is the gold standard test and any abnormal results from the other tests will lead to a colonoscopy.

Talk to your provider about any symptoms like changes in bowel habits like persistent constipation or diarrhea, blood in or on the stool, and abdominal discomfort like cramps or pain that doesn't go away. Other symptoms include unexplained weight loss, bloating or feeling like your bowel doesn't empty completely. Ask your doctor when you should screen for colon cancer and what test is right for you.

*Sheri Pope is a Prevention Health Specialist at RiverStone Health, specializing in our Cancer Prevention Program. She can be reached at 406.247.3305 or [PublicHealth@RiverStoneHealth.org](mailto:PublicHealth@RiverStoneHealth.org).*