

How to prevent colorectal cancer

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While colorectal cancer can strike at any age, it mostly occurs after the age of 50 and people of Chinese ethnicity have a higher risk of getting the disease.

People with a family history of colorectal cancer or polyps, which are non-cancerous growths of tissue, may also be at a higher risk.

Although these are factors that cannot be controlled, doctors say there are lifestyle and dietary choices that people can make to help prevent colorectal cancer.

This includes maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly and avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol consumption, says Dr Quah Hak Mien, a consultant colorectal and general surgeon at Gleneagles Hospital.

“We should maintain a balanced diet that has lots of vegetables and fruit and whole grains, and reduce the consumption of red meat and processed meat. Eating meat cooked at very high temperatures, like grilled meat, might also increase one’s cancer risk,” adds Dr Quah.

Many people in Singapore are not doing tests that can help detect colorectal cancer early, doctors say.

Citing findings from the Singapore Cancer Registry Annual Report 2019, Dr Isaac Seow-En, a consultant at Singapore General Hospital’s department of colorectal surgery, says that despite national colorectal cancer screening programmes, about 60 per cent of cases are diagnosed at later stages of the disease.

People aged 50 and above are advised to go for a colonoscopy, where a long flexible tube is inserted into the large intestine to check for tumours. If nothing worrying is found, a subsequent colonoscopy is necessary only 10 years later, says Dr Seow-En.

Another way to screen for colorectal cancer is through a stool test called the Faecal Immunochemical Test, which is offered free of charge by the Singapore Cancer Society. It can detect small amounts of blood in the stool which are usually invisible to the naked eye.

Those who are above age 50 and have no symptoms of colorectal cancer can do this test once a year as an alternative to a colonoscopy.

Says Dr Quah: “Early detection of colorectal cancer improves the chances of successful treatment and long-term cure.”

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DR QUAH HAK MIEN, a consultant colorectal and general surgeon at Gleneagles Hospital