

## - Colorectal cancer

# Digestive health

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March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, while March 5 to 11 is Philippine Digestive Health Week. Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer and the fourth leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the country.

Colorectal cancer does not always cause symptoms, especially in its early stages, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If it does become symptomatic, common symptoms include a change in bowel habits; blood in or on stool; diarrhea, constipation, or feeling that the bowel does not empty all the way; abdominal pain, aches, or cramps that do not go away; and unexplained weight loss. It is important for a person to immediately consult a doctor if he or she develops any of these symptoms.

Finding cancer early, when it is small and has not spread, often allows for more treatment options, according to the American Cancer Society. Most colorectal cancers start as a growth or polyp on the inner lining of the colon or rectum. Some types of polyps can change into cancer over time but not all polyps can become cancer, it said.

To reduce colorectal cancer risk, one should maintain a healthy weight; engage in regular physical activity; eat a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains and low in red and processed meats; and refrain from drinking alcohol and cigarette smoking, according to the Philippine Society of Gastroenterology.

It also recommends regular screening through fecal immunochemical test and colonoscopy for the prevention, early detection and treatment of early-stage colorectal cancer.

Colorectal cancer can often be found early through screening. When found at an early stage before it has spread, the five-year survival rate is about 90%, the American Cancer Society said. When cancer has spread outside the colon or rectum, survival rates are lower.

The health organization lays down treatment options for patients. One involves so-called local treatment — treating the tumor without affecting the rest of the body. Types of local treatment include surgery for colon or rectal cancer and radiation therapy for colorectal cancer.

Moreover, colorectal cancer can be treated using medicines or the so-called systemic treatments. Among these are chemotherapy, targeted therapy or immunotherapy. The American Cancer Society notes that as researchers learn more about changes in cells that cause colon or rectal cancer, scientists have developed new types of drugs to specifically target these changes. Immunotherapy, on the other hand, is the use of medicines to help a person's own immune system better recognize and destroy cancer cells.

Meanwhile, the World Gastroenterology Organization recommends eating foods rich in fiber such as fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts and seeds. Fiber plays an important part in a person's digestive health and provides many benefits. Since it is not absorbed in the small intestine, it can boost food volume, while adding fewer calories. Fiber also contributes to the feeling of fullness (satiety), which can help limit overeating and prevent weight gain.

The UK National Health Service (NHS) shares some rules for good eating habits to prevent digestive problems. First, it will be important not to rush one's food, taking time to eat slowly and chew each mouthful well. Second, it will be helpful not to overeat, reducing the size of portions at meal-times. A person can also try eating four to five small meals instead of three large ones. Third, it will be good for a person to eat his last meal at least two to three hours before lying down.

The NHS also notes that stress management can ease stomach troubles. Anxiety and worry can upset the delicate balance of digestion, which can cause a feeling of unease in a person's stomach during times of stress.

In some people, stress slows down digestion, causing bloating, pain and constipation. In others, stress speeds it up, causing diarrhea. Some people lose their appetite completely. Stress can also worsen digestive conditions such as stomach ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome.

Having a good digestive health can be as simple as having good eating habits, managing stress and even going for screenings to avoid health problems. If one is diagnosed with more complicated health concerns like cancers, it is important to remember that mere diagnosis is no longer a death sentence.