

Never too young for colorectal cancer

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COLORECTAL cancer has become the third most common cancer among men worldwide and the second most common among women, according to the Globocan 2020 report from the World Health Organisation.



Once thought of as an elderly person's disease, this particular cancer is now increasingly prevalent among young adults.

It is no longer uncommon to see patients in their 20s, 30s and even in their teens presenting with this disease — often at a more advanced stage, when treatment becomes more complex and outcomes more uncertain.

“Age alone does not protect anyone from colorectal cancer,” says Ara Damansara Medical Centre consultant general surgeon Dr Premjeet Singh.

One reason colorectal cancer is frequently detected late in younger individuals is because early symptoms are often mild and easy to dismiss.

Many young patients experience symptoms such as constipation, rectal bleeding or mild abdominal discomfort, but they tend to brush these off, he explains.

Rectal bleeding is commonly assumed to be piles, while changes in bowel habits are often blamed on stress or a busy lifestyle.

Cultural discomfort around bowel health also plays a role, with many patients delaying consultation due to embarrassment or fear of invasive tests. Diet and lifestyle habits also have an influence.

LIFESTYLE LINK

“We are seeing younger adults consuming more processed foods and less fibre. Over time, this affects gut health and increases colorectal cancer risk.”

Diets high in red and processed meats, combined with low intake of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, are known to affect bowel health and over time, increase colorectal cancer risk.

But because symptoms do not significantly disrupt daily life, many individuals delay seeking medical attention. By the time they consult a doctor, the disease may already be at an advanced stage, requiring more complex treatment. Dr Premjeet says colorectal cancer is particularly dangerous because it can develop quietly. In its early stages, many patients feel completely well and have no obvious warning signs.

“Colorectal cancer can remain silent for a long time. When symptoms appear, it usually means the cancer has already grown significantly.”

This is why waiting can be risky. Screening allows doctors to detect problems before cancer fully develops or while it is still highly treatable, even in people who feel perfectly healthy.

COLONOSCOPY: MORE THAN JUST A DIAGNOSTIC TEST

For many, the word “colonoscopy” elicits feelings of fear and discomfort.

In reality, patients are sedated during the procedure. Beyond diagnosis, colonoscopies also play a preventive role.

During the procedure, doctors can detect and remove polyps, small growths in the colon that may turn cancerous if left untreated.

“Removing a polyp early is essentially stopping cancer before it starts,” explains Dr Premjeet.

The gap between early and late detection of colorectal cancer can be life-changing, he adds.

When caught early, treatment is often simpler and less invasive. Surgery can frequently be done laparoscopically, which allows for faster recovery and fewer complications. In some cases, patients may avoid chemotherapy altogether.

In contrast, patients diagnosed late often face major surgery, chemotherapy, longer recovery periods and a greater impact on their quality of life.