

WHAT IS CANCER?

Cancer is not just one disease, but a group of almost 100 diseases. All cancers are characterized by (1) an uncontrolled growth of cells in the human body and (2) the ability of those cells to spread from the original site – sometimes very quickly – to other areas of the body. If the spread is not controlled, cancer can result in death.

One out of every four deaths in the United States is caused by cancer. It is second only to heart disease as a cause of death for Americans. Although cancer can occur at any age, its occurrence increases as individuals age. Two of the most common types of cancers in the United States today – prostate cancer and colorectal cancer – can be detected at early stages through blood tests.

WHAT IS PROSTATE CANCER?

Prostate cancer is a relatively common type of cancer that strikes the prostate, a walnut-sized gland found in men. It is located near the bladder, surrounding the upper segment of the urethra. Its function is Risk of prostate cancer varies with ethnicity, with African American men being at highest risk.

Prostate cancer is curable when detected early but its symptoms, including various problems associated with urination, are common to other conditions, as well. The disease is most often diagnosed when the patient undergoes a routine screening examination.

WHAT CAN A BLOOD TEST TELL ME ABOUT PROSTATE CANCER?

The cells lining the prostate produce a protein known as prostate-specific antigen (PSA), which circulates in the blood. Blood tests measure, among other things, the amount of PSA in the blood. Prostate cancers produce an excessively large amount of this protein, so when blood tests determine that PSA levels are higher than normal for the patient's age group, cancer may be present. The amount of PSA in the blood drops when cancer is successfully treated but rises again if the tumor recurs, especially if it spreads to other parts of the body.

WHAT IS COLORECTAL CANCER?

The colon comprises the majority of the large intestine. Its function is to absorb and conserve water, vitamins and minerals from food that enters the intestine. The colon also directs undigested material, or waste, from the intestines through the rectum.

Colon and rectum cancers are often referred to as colorectal cancer. Most cases begin with the development of benign finger-like growths known as 'polyps' in the colon or rectum. If these polyps become cancerous, they can create blockages in the intestines and, like most cancers, ultimately spread to other parts of the body.

Like many other kinds of cancers, colorectal cancer is not always signaled by the onset of symptoms. If there are symptoms, they can include:

- Blood in or on a bowel movement
- Frequent, inexplicable stomach aches, pains or cramps
- Changes in bowel habits, such as having narrower than usual stools
- Inexplicable weight loss

WHAT CAUSES COLORECTAL CANCER?

Risk of colorectal cancer appears to be associated with genetic, dietary and lifestyle factors, as well as age. Colorectal cancer is most common in people over the age of 50.

WHAT CAN A BLOOD TEST TELL ME ABOUT COLORECTAL CANCER?

Screening tests can detect intestinal polyps at very early stages, when treatment works best. The standard fecal occult blood test (FOBT) kit contains three specially prepared cards on which a small stool sample can be spread on different days, using a stick provided in the kit. The samples are placed in a special envelope and either mailed or brought to the lab for analysis.

*For more information regarding the services provided by the Pathology Center,
call (402) 354-4541 or (888) 432-8980.*

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