



Patient education: Colon and rectal cancer (The Basics)

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What is colorectal cancer?

"Colorectal" is a shortened way of saying "colon and rectal."

Colorectal cancer is when normal cells in the colon (large intestine) or rectum change into abnormal cells and grow out of control. The colon is also called the large intestine, and the rectum is the lower part of the colon ([figure 1](#)).

Colorectal cancer can be serious. But there are many ways to treat it.

Is there a test for colorectal cancer?

Yes. There are a few tests that can find colorectal cancer. Your doctor or nurse will explain the options.

If your doctor or nurse thinks you might have colorectal cancer, they will probably suggest you get a test called a "colonoscopy." During a colonoscopy, the doctor inserts a tube and a tiny camera into your anus and up to your colon. Then, they look at your colon for cancer or other problems.

What are the symptoms of colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer might not cause any symptoms at first.

When it does cause symptoms, they can include:

- Stomach pain
- A change in bowel movements (number, texture, color, or size)
- Blood in bowel movements
- Feeling weak, tired, or short of breath

How is colorectal cancer treated?

Most types of colorectal cancer are treated with 1 or more of these:

- Surgery to remove the part of the colon or rectum that has cancer
- Chemotherapy – These are medicines that kill cancer cells or stop them from growing.
- Radiation therapy – This kills cancer cells.

Some people get "immunotherapy." This means medicines that work with the body's infection-fighting system, called the "immune system," to stop cancer growth.

Will my body work normally after surgery?

It depends on what type of surgery you have. If your doctor can reconnect your colon or rectum after removing the part with cancer, you should be able to have bowel movements normally. But if your doctor cannot reconnect your colon or rectum, they will make a hole in your belly and attach the end of your colon or a loop of intestine to that hole. The hole is called a "colostomy" or an "ileostomy," depending on which part of the intestine was affected ([figure 2](#)). Your bowel movements will come out through the opening into a bag that is glued to your skin.

Some people need a colostomy or ileostomy only for a short time. This is called a "temporary" colostomy or ileostomy. Then, they can have another surgery to reconnect their colon or rectum. Other people need to have a colostomy for the rest of their life. This is called a "permanent colostomy." If you need a colostomy or ileostomy, an "ostomy nurse" will teach you how to care for yourself.

What happens after treatment?

You will see your doctor or nurse regularly for a few years. That way, they can check to see if the cancer comes back. You will probably get blood tests, a few more colonoscopy tests, and CT scans. CT scans are imaging tests that create pictures of the inside of the body.

Your doctor or nurse will also talk to you about your overall health, including your mood, stress level, sex life, eating and exercise habits, and any other problems you might have after treatment. It's also a good idea to quit smoking, if you smoke, and avoid or limit alcohol. Doctors are not sure if doing this helps people live longer after having colorectal cancer. But even if it does not, it will improve your overall health.

More on this topic

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Patient education: Lowering the risk of colon and rectal cancer (The Basics)

Patient education: Colon polyps (The Basics)

Patient education: Bloody stools in adults (The Basics)

Patient education: Carcinoembryonic antigen blood test (The Basics)

Patient education: Colonoscopy (The Basics)

Patient education: Colostomy or ileostomy surgery (The Basics)

Patient education: Living with a colostomy (The Basics)

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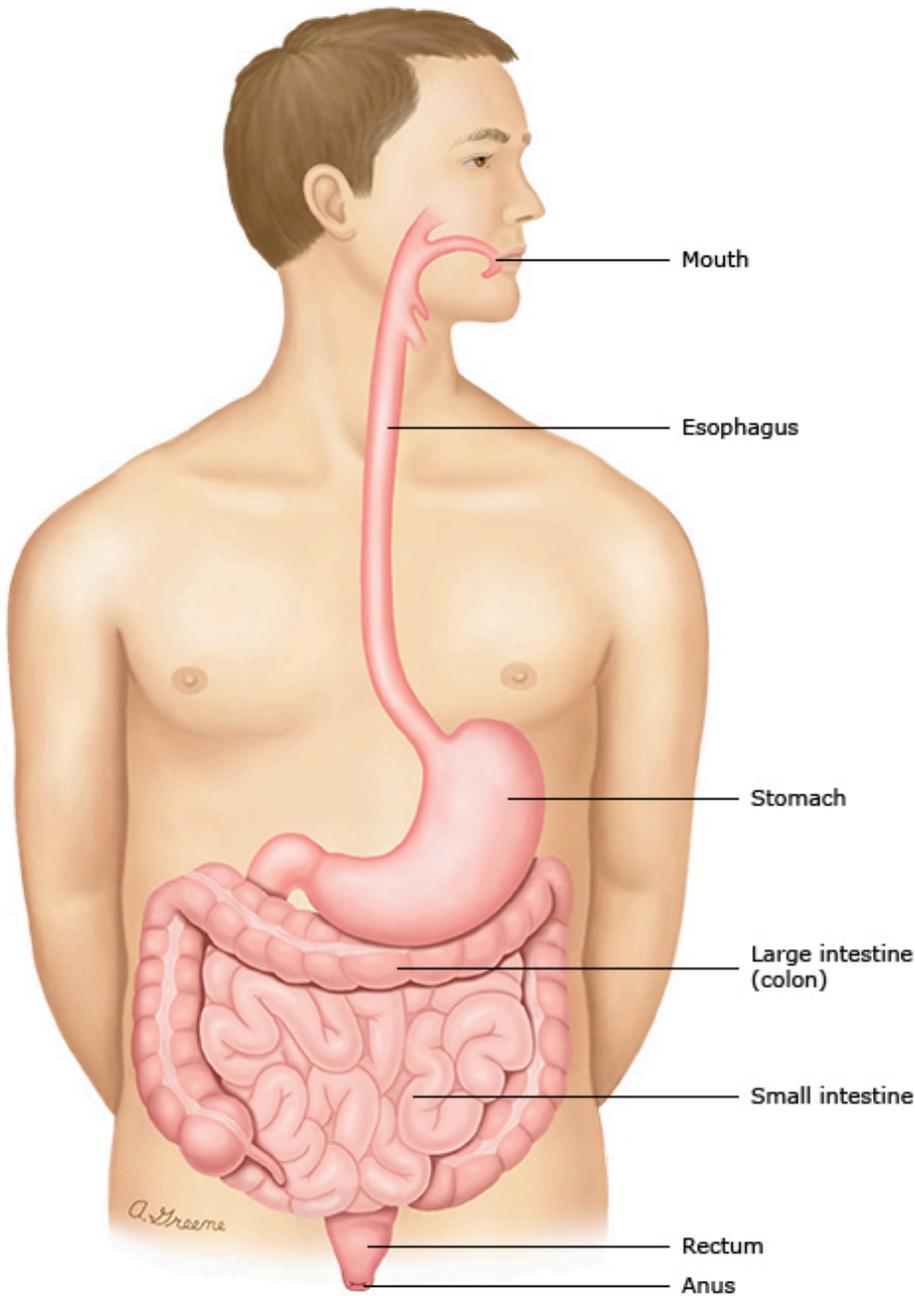
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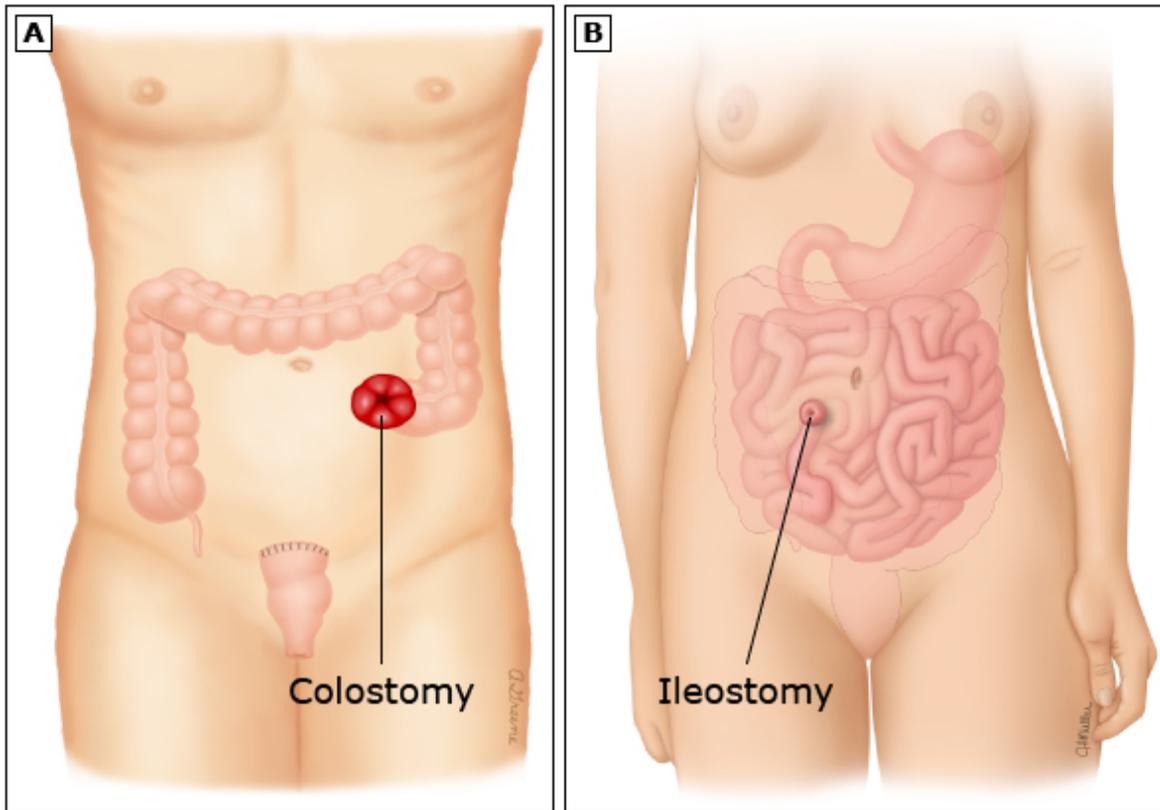
GRAPHICS

Figure 1: Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together, these organs are called the "digestive system" or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water. The liver, pancreas, and gallbladder are also part of the digestive system (not shown in this drawing).

Figure 2: Colostomy and ileostomy



(A) A colostomy, in which the opening or "stoma" connects your large intestine (bowel) to the skin.

(B) An ileostomy, in which the opening or "stoma" connects your small intestine to the skin.

Bowel movements exit the body through the stoma. They go into a bag that is attached to the skin.

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