

Patient Education

Radiation Medicine Department

Colorectal Cancer: Treatment

Treatment

Specialists who treat colorectal cancer include gastroenterologists (doctors who specialize in diseases of the digestive system), surgeons, medical oncologists, and radiation oncologists.

Your doctor will develop a treatment plan to fit your individual needs. Treatment for colorectal cancer depends mainly on the location of the tumor in the colon or rectum and the stage of the disease. Your doctor can describe the treatment choices and the expected results.

Treatment for colorectal cancer may involve surgery, radiation therapy, or chemotherapy. Some people have a combination of treatments.

- Surgery is the most common treatment for colorectal cancer. It is a type of local therapy. It treats the cancer in the colon or rectum and the area close to the tumor.
- Chemotherapy uses anticancer drugs to kill cancer cells. It is called systemic therapy because it enters the bloodstream and can affect cancer cells throughout the body.

You may have chemotherapy alone or combined with surgery, radiation therapy, or both. Chemotherapy given before surgery is called neoadjuvant therapy. Chemotherapy before surgery may shrink a large tumor.

Chemotherapy after surgery is called adjuvant therapy. Adjuvant therapy is used to destroy any remaining cancer cells and prevent the cancer from coming back in the colon or rectum, or elsewhere.

Chemotherapy is also used to treat people with advanced disease.

Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy (also called radiotherapy) is local therapy. It uses high-energy rays to kill cancer cells. It affects cancer cells only in the treated area.

Radiation therapy may be used before and after surgery. You may have radiation therapy before surgery to shrink the tumor or after surgery to kill cancer cells that may remain in the area. Some people may have radiation therapy during surgery. This is called IORT (intra-operative radiation therapy). Radiation therapy may also be used to relieve pain and other problems caused by the cancer.

Doctors use two types of radiation therapy to treat cancer. Sometimes people receive both types:

- **External radiation:** The radiation comes from a machine. Most patients go to the hospital or clinic for their treatment, generally 5 days a week for several weeks. In some cases, external radiation is given during surgery.
- **Internal radiation (implant radiation):** The radiation comes from radioactive material placed in thin tubes put directly into or near the tumor. The patient stays in the hospital, and the implants generally remain in place for several days. Usually they are removed before the patient goes home.

You may want to ask your doctor these questions before having radiation therapy:

- Why do I need this treatment?
- What are the risks and side effects of this treatment?
- Are there any long-term effects?
- When will the treatments begin? When will they end?
- How will I feel during therapy?
- What can I do to take care of myself during therapy?
- Can I continue my normal activities?

You do not need to ask all of your questions at once. You will have other chances to ask the doctor to explain things that are not clear and to ask for more information.

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Side Effects

The side effects of cancer treatment depend on the type of treatment and may be different for each person. Side effects are often only temporary.

Doctors and nurses can explain the possible side effects of treatment, and they can suggest ways to help relieve symptoms that may occur during and after treatment.

Side Effects of Radiation Therapy

Because treatment often damages healthy cells and tissues, unwanted side effects are common. Side effects depend mainly on the type and extent of the treatment. Side effects may not be the same for each person,

