

Colon Cancer and Young People: Trust Your Gut

March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month. For years, colon cancer was believed by many to be an “old person’s disease.” A recent [study](#), however, revealed that young patients ages 20 to 29 have seen the highest spike in rates of diagnosed colon cancer cases.

According to the American Cancer Society, nearly 18,000 people under the age of 50 will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer this year in the United States. Many of these cases are being diagnosed at late stages, which is believed to be happening in large part because many young people brush off symptoms as being nothing out of the norm.

“I think there is a misconception that when you are young, your risk of colon cancer is smaller. What ends up happening is a lot of people just discredit it as something they ate, or needing to be on a better diet or other issues that have been going on. But when you talk to these people who have had colon cancer who are younger, they typically have been having these symptoms for some time,” says Dr. Michael Hurtuk, an OSF HealthCare fellowship-trained colorectal surgeon.

So, what are these symptoms – and does colon cancer present differently based on age? The short answer: No, it does not.

“The symptoms for colon cancer are not different in young adults than compared to older adults. Symptoms that we see include rectal and lower GI (gastrointestinal) bleeding, blood with bowel movements, weight loss, low appetite, abdominal pain, and so forth,” Dr. M. Bassel Atassi, an OSF HealthCare hematologist/oncologist explains.

In many cases, the symptoms of colon cancer end up presenting as stomach upset rather than bleeding or other symptoms that may be a bit more alarming and prompt someone to call their doctor sooner. If you do not have bleeding but are someone who experiences frequent GI issues such as chronic gas, abnormal bowel movements, stomach pain, or constipation, you probably have tried everything under the sun to alleviate these symptoms.

While sometimes the symptoms of colon cancer could end up having a root cause of something manageable such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), Crohn’s Disease, or intolerance to foods such as dairy or gluten – it is important to be certain.

Whether you have been experiencing abnormal bowel movements and blood in your stool or have been dealing with general GI issues for some time, Dr. Hurtuk recommends taking all of these symptoms seriously – especially because some people can experience symptoms for years before getting a colon cancer diagnosis.

“It is a very broad spectrum of symptoms you worry about with colon cancer. But once these things are progressing, you need to be concerned. If your mind tells you I need to get it checked out, then you probably need to get it checked out,” advises Dr. Hurtuk.

Some risk factors associated with colon cancer include obesity, lack of physical activity, a diet high in red meat, and tobacco and alcohol use. Genetic risk factors include a personal history of polyps or IBS, race (colon cancer rates tend to be [higher](#) in African Americans), having diabetes, and a family history of colorectal cancer.

“One of the very important criteria that we look for when we see young adults with colon cancer is if they have a family history. About 35% of adults with colon cancer do have history of colon cancer in other family members who also were diagnosed at a young age,” Dr. Atassi says.

The American Cancer Society says as many as one in three people who develop colorectal cancer have other family members who have had it – but despite the family correlation, most colorectal cancers are found in people without a family history of the disease, and some people diagnosed with colon cancer have none of the risk factors.

The bottom line? Trust your gut – both figuratively and literally. And if you feel like something is off, talk to a doctor.

“Be honest with yourself and pay close attention to your body. If you are having bleeding and you’re young, don’t just assume it is hemorrhoids. Make sure that your primary care doctor works it up – or see somebody and talk to them about it and get it worked up. Don’t just come up with the explanation that it’s just constipation,” says Dr. Hurtuk.

If you or a loved one is experiencing any of the symptoms of colon cancer but do not have a primary care provider, find one at www.osfhealthcare.org.