

Prevention of Bowel Cancer

Colon cancer is the second most common form of cancer in Hong Kong, with 3,706 patients developing this cancer and 1,614 dying from it in 2005 alone. Colon cancer is unfortunately becoming more common each year, probably due to the generally increased consumption of meat and fat and exposure to carcinogens in the population's diet. However quite apart from these dietary factors, genetic factors can also lead to the formation of colon polyps and cancer.

Colon cancer is a silent killer, because sufferers do not usually experience any symptoms until the cancer is very advanced. Only in the later stages of the disease do patients suffer abdominal pain due to obstruction of the intestine or bleeding from the tumour itself. By this time the cancerous cells may already have spread to other organs, reducing the chance of a cure. Therefore early detection and prevention are essential in the battle against this killer disease.

The good news is that colon cancer is a preventable disease. This is because an important feature of colon cancer is that it starts life as a benign polyp, only becoming cancerous after several years in the patient's body. If the polyp can be detected and removed before the cells turn cancerous, no colon cancer occurs. Therefore it is important to look proactively for polyps and remove them before it is too late. The most effective way to hunt for these polyps is by colonoscopy, which involves passing a flexible telescope into the colon to give a detailed picture of the inside of the bowel. Any polyps found can be removed at the same time. The procedure itself takes approximately 30 minutes and the patient can leave the hospital in the same day. It is recommended that everyone over the age of 50 should undergo some form of screening for colon cancer, and of course people with a strong family history of cancer should undergo screening at a younger age.

Apart from screening for polyps, adopting a healthy diet with more fruit and vegetables and a lower intake of meat, combined with regular exercise and abstinence from smoking helps considerably, so it is clear that a healthy lifestyle and proactive screening are vital elements in the battle against this major killer.



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