THE CHALLENGES OF COLON CANCER

Cancer of the colon (the large intestine) is one of the most common forms of cancer. Although it is diagnosed most frequently in people over age 50, colon cancer can occur in men and women of all ages. People with a family history of colon cancer are at greater risk for developing the disease themselves. Those who have had other intestinal disorders like colon polyps (small growths that may become malignant), diverticulosis, or inflammatory bowel disease are also more likely to develop colon cancer.

Symptoms don’t usually occur until the cancer has advanced and spread to other organs. As a result, currently available treatments can control disease symptoms but they cannot cure the disease.

Colon cancer is the third most common cause of cancer deaths in the United States after lung cancer.

RISK FACTORS FOR COLON CANCER

Factors that increase the risk for colon cancer include:

- Low-fiber, high fat diet
- Lack of physical activity
- Diabetes or insulin resistance
- Overweight
- Smoking
- Excessive alcohol drinking
- Radiation treatments used to treat another cancer

Most of these conditions can be treated with lifestyle changes that also improves overall physical health.

SYMPTOMS OF COLON CANCER

Symptoms of colon cancer include:

- Rectal bleeding, dark stools, blood in the stool
- Diarrhea or constipation that lasts for more than a few days
- Abdominal pain or camps
- Weakness and fatigue

Some of these common gastrointestinal symptoms can also be caused by temporary digestive upsets, viral infections or food allergies. If they continue for more than a few days or become worse contact your doctor.
DIAGNOSING COLON CANCER

Early detection and treatment of colon cancer can often cure the disease. People with a family history of the disease, are age 50 or older, or who have other risk factors are encouraged to be screened regularly. Commonly used tests and procedures to assess intestinal health include:

- Blood tests. A decrease in red blood cells may indicate bleeding in the colon that may be caused by a tumor or other abnormal growth.
- Fecal occult test. A small sample of stool is applied to a special card. If the color of the card changes, it indicates blood in the stool. Bleeding may be caused by hemorrhoids, polyps, inflammatory bowel disease, aspirin or other conditions so additional tests will be needed to identify the cause and source of the blood.
- Sigmoidoscopy. A flexible instrument – a sigmoidoscope -- is inserted into the anus to examine the lining of the anus and lower intestine.
- Barium enema. The colon is filled with a contrast material called barium that outlines the intestine and identifies abnormalities.

TREATING COLON CANCER

A variety of treatments are available to reduce the size and number of tumors, manage unpleasant symptoms, and prevent tumors from spreading to other parts of the body. These include surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. The doctor will choose the best remedies based on your parent’s physical condition, and the size and stage of the tumor.

THE ROLE OF FAMILY CAREGIVERS

Coming to terms with a diagnosis of any kind of cancer and its treatment is a significant challenge to the person with the disease and his or her family and friends. Learn as much as you can about the disease from your parent’s doctor and organizations like the American Cancer Society so that you can understand the diagnostic procedures and treatments he or she will be undergoing. With this information you can be an active member of your parent’s health care team and provide the best possible care for him or her. [604-2/10]