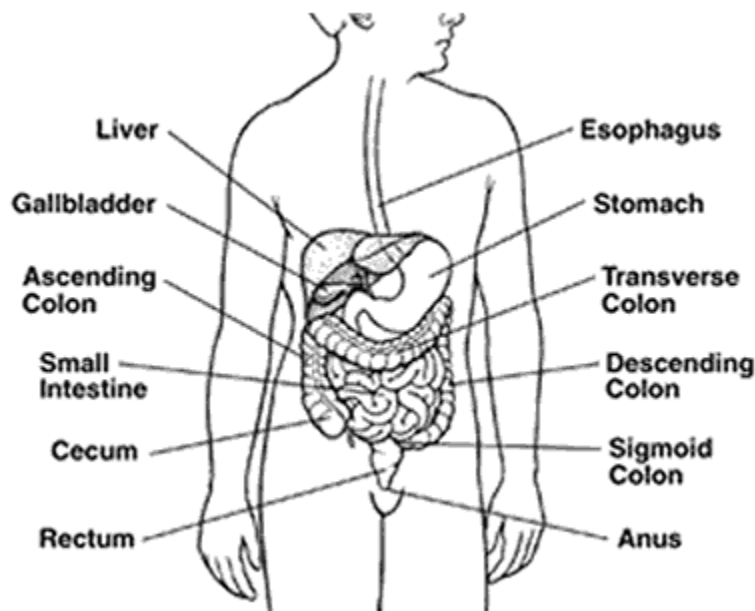


Information for Behavioral Health Providers in Primary Care

Colorectal Cancer Information Sheet

Colorectal Cancer

Colorectal cancer is a term used to refer to cancer that starts in the colon or rectum. Colon and rectal cancers begin in the digestive system, also called the GI (gastrointestinal) system. After food is chewed and swallowed, it travels down to the stomach. There it is partly broken down and sent to the small intestine. The word "small" refers to the width of the small intestine. The small intestine is really the longest part of the digestive system. It is about 20 feet long. The small intestine continues breaking down the food and absorbs most of the nutrients. The small intestine joins the large intestine (also called the large bowel or colon), a muscular tube about five feet long. The first part of the colon absorbs water and nutrients from the food and also serves as a storage place for waste matter. The waste matter moves from the colon into the rectum, the last 6 inches of the digestive system. From there the waste passes out of the body through the anus.



Colorectal Cancer Information Sheet (continued)

The colon has four sections, as shown in the picture above (sigmoid, descending, transverse, ascending). Cancer can start in any of the four sections or in the rectum. The wall of each of these sections (and rectum) has several layers of tissues. Cancer starts in the inner layer and can grow through some or all of the other layers. The stage (extent of spread) of a cancer depends to a great degree on which of these layers it affects. In most cases, colorectal cancers develop slowly over a period of several years. We now know that most of these cancers begin as a polyp--a growth of tissue that starts in the lining and grows into the center of the colon or rectum. A type of polyp known as an *adenoma* can become cancerous. Removing the polyp early may prevent it from becoming cancer. Over 95% of colon and rectal cancers are *adenocarcinomas*. These are cancers of the cells that line the inside of the colon and rectum. There are other, more rare, types of tumors of the colon as well.

For more information you may visit: www.cancer.org the website of the American Cancer Society.

These Information Sheets are designed to provide a brief overview of various medical conditions. Referring to the Information Sheets may help you communicate more effectively with other members of the Primary Care Team. The Information Sheets are by no means an exhaustive description of the disorders. If you need additional information, please engage in a more detailed search. Don't forget to consult with other members of the Primary Care Team. They are an invaluable source of information!