

Men's Health

In your gut

It's the fastest growing cancer in India. But unlike other major killers, colon cancer may not be a result of our food habits

Words: Dr Piyali M

In recent years, the way we live and how we eat have been taking the rap for numerous health hazards, ranging from obesity to diabetes. But in the case of colon cancer, which is now making urban Indians its victims, analysis of the data has revealed that its rise might have less to do with our decadent eating and lifestyle habits and more to do with the simple fact that Indians are living longer today.

It has been observed that the incidence of colon cancer starts to rise sharply after the age of 50. With life expectancy in India hitting 64 years, according to the latest UNICEF data, this explains why an increasing number of Indians are being diagnosed with colon cancer.

"Indians are becoming aware of colon cancer thanks to better diagnostic techniques available in our country. People in their 30s and 40s ▶



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come to me when they are constipated or notice a drop in their haemoglobin level. After diagnosis, we find that some of them do have signs of colon cancer and thus conduct further tests. Better application of more accurate techniques may also account for the rise in the number of diagnosed cases," says Dr Ramesh Sarin, senior consultant, oncology, Apollo Hospitals, New Delhi.

According to an update in the National Registry of Cancer by the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR), cancer of the colon, breasts and oesophagus are definitely on the rise.

So how can we protect ourselves from this increased risk of colon cancer?

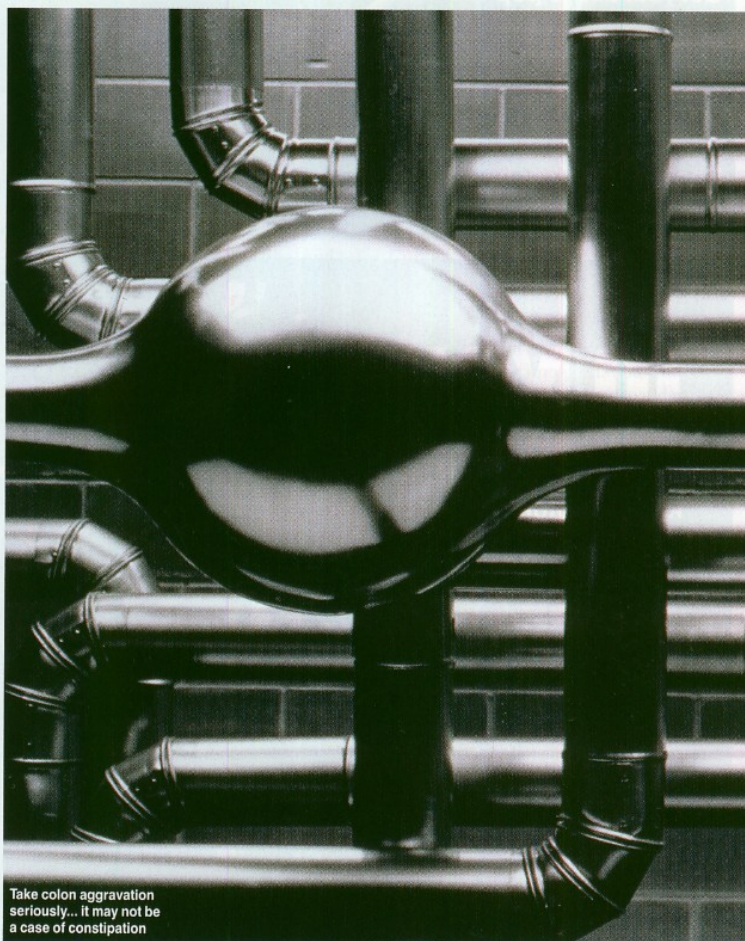
According to Dr Shanti Vardhan, a consultant oncologist at Moolchand Medcity, New Delhi, "There is some evidence that the type of food you eat has an effect on the incidence of colon cancer. However, mutation in genes is the main culprit for it. Of late, this has become a tool for diagnostics. Now, one can even predict the recurrence of colon cancer."

Pay heed to symptoms

"Diet, smoking, alcohol and environmental factors play a significant role in increasing colorectal cancer risk; nevertheless it is difficult to quantify the risk of individual factors as there is always an interaction with hereditary factors," adds Dr Sarin.

The polyps that cause colon cancer aren't malignant in the initial stages of growth, and can sometimes take up to 10 years to develop into cancer of the colon. Which is why, if detected early, the problem can be effectively treated, with a high possibility of stopping the cancer in its tracks.

Unfortunately, in the early stages, colon cancer gives rise to no or minimal symptoms. At times, the disease is heralded



Take colon aggravation seriously... it may not be a case of constipation

by innocuous symptoms such as a change in bowel habits like a prolonged bout of constipation, diarrhoea or a feeling of abdominal fullness.

Many people ignore such non-specific symptoms, attributing it to a seafood meal the night before or stress at the office.

Another common symptom is rectal bleeding. Initially the amount of bleeding may be very small and may not be detected from stool examination, but can be picked out by an easy-to-perform test—the faecal occult blood test (FOBT).

Colon cancer is simple to cure, provided it is detected at an early stage

"FOBT is easily available and not very expensive. It can aid early diagnosis of colon cancer. If there is any family history or symptoms, one should go in for the FOBT," says Dr Vardhan. "This is a simple test based on the fact that colorectal polyps and cancers can bleed into the colon. But this test is not cent per cent accurate as sometimes blood in the stools may be due to reasons other than colon cancer, like piles, colitis, worms or some kind of tumour. Colonoscopy is then the best diagnostic tool," adds Dr Sarin.

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Check your family history

The other commonly used screening tests include sigmoidoscopy. A flexible tube with a viewing camera is inserted through the anus of a sedated patient and the walls of the gut are then examined to check for any abnormalities. Any growths detected can be removed by the doctor during the procedure itself. There are also alternative screening options such as Barium enema, virtual colonoscopy/CT colography and faecal DNA analysis.

Knowing your family history is thus very important. People with a positive family history of Familial Adenomatous Polyposis (FAP) are at a higher risk and must opt for a check-up, says Dr Vardhan.

FAP is a genetic disorder where people have benign polyps throughout the colon. This may predispose them to colon cancer, says Dr Amit Bhargava, consultant oncologist, Max Healthcare, New Delhi.

According to Dr Bhargava, 10 per cent of Indians have a positive family history of colon cancer, while 90 per cent of the cases are sporadic with no associated family history.

"You have to be extremely careful if there have been cases of colon cancer in your family. It's best never to be in doubt. If you have the same symptoms, go for virtual colonoscopy (or the fibre optic endoscopic colonoscopy)," adds Dr Vardhan.

If your tests come back positive, here is what you need to know. "Surgery including minimally invasive endoscopic and laparoscopic techniques is the treatment of choice. Some patients may require chemotherapy and radiation therapy with about 50 per cent of patients requiring a combination of both," says Dr Sarin.

Live right

- Keep an eye on your red meat intake. Its consumption has to be limited to under 500gm a week.
- Include roughage-rich foods in your daily diet, such as whole wheat, corn bran, fresh fruits, vegetables such as celery, green beans, potato skin and tomato peel.
- Exercise regularly. Really, there is no alternative!

Eat more roughage

"Colon polyps can reoccur, and that's why patients need to be kept under regular surveillance to prevent reoccurrences," says Dr Vardhan.

Scientists have long examined the relationship between colon cancer and dietary habits and the conclusive evidence is that high-energy consumption or a high-calorie diet and resultant obesity makes a person more vulnerable to colon cancer. A study conducted in Canada attributed as much as 10 per cent of all colon cancers to obesity. "There is some evidence indicating the role of dietary habits leading to colon cancer. Non-vegetarians are more prone to this as compared to vegetarians. Red meat is a strict no-no," says Dr Vardhan.

Colon cancer is more common in north Indians as they eat refined food with little or no roughage (dietary fibres). Roughage helps correct bowel disorders and keeps it functioning normally. In the absence of roughage, toxins may accumulate and increase risk.

Curcumin debate

Curcumin, an extract of turmeric, has been found by the researchers at Tohoku University in Sendai, Japan to reduce colon cancer risk. But doctors don't seem to agree. "We

don't have a substantial study yet which says turmeric can help reduce the risk of colon cancer," says Dr Sarin.


There is medication, of course. Certain medicines have been found to reduce the risk of colon cancer. These include folate containing multivitamins, calcium and vitamin D supplements, and even hormone replacement therapy.

Furthermore, there are studies that say drugs like aspirin reduce colon cancer risk. Nonetheless, this doesn't mean you should start popping aspirins. "Aspirin doesn't help in prevention of colon cancer," says Dr Bhargava.

Colon cancer can be easily treated if detected at a very early stage. Regular screening checks can pick up early stage changes in the colon which can then be treated to avert the development of full-blown cancer, adds Dr Bhargava.

According to Dr Sarin, there are factors like ignorance, lack of time and fear that stop people from coming forward.

Her advice to one and all is: "Cut down on your refined diet. Have roughage-rich foods like whole wheat, corn bran, flax seeds, fresh fruits and vegetables. If you are having an hamburger, make sure you order salad with it. Walk more and shun a sedentary lifestyle."

Time to spend some time at a grocery store near you! 

Cut down on your refined diet. If you're having a burger, order the salad too!



Get Tested

Got it or not, there is no harm in getting yourself checked

Faecal occult blood test:

Pros

- Cheap; costs Rs 90
- No Bowel/dietary preparation required
- Can be done by your GP

Cons

- Needs to be done every year
- Not 100 per cent accurate
- A positive test requires future evaluation

Colonoscopy:

Pros

- Accurate
- Biopsy and polyp removal can be done at the same time
- To be done once in 5-10 years

Cons

- Costly (approx Rs 2,500-3,000)
- Needs bowel/dietary preparation

(Source: Dr Lal PathLabs, New Delhi)