

# Early screening key to colorectal cancer detection

**DR RAGHAVSUNDAR**

**F**IGHTING cancer is like going to war – you don't know whether you are going to come out alive, but you do whatever it takes to destroy the enemy, said Mr M, a colorectal cancer survivor who was treated at the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore.

When he first started having blood in his stools, Mr M was too frightened to see a doctor as he was uncertain of the outcome. He found the courage to do so only weeks later.

After completing the tests, Mr M was informed that he had advanced colorectal cancer. Fortunately, there was still treatment available for his condition, although a cure was not guaranteed.

The treatment was a combination of chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery as advised by his doctor.

"I was fortunate to survive my battle against cancer," Mr M recalled.

"Looking back, I wish I had seen my doctors earlier. It would probably have been better if I had gone for the recommended screening. It may have given doctors a chance to detect the tumour at an earlier stage."

Colorectal cancer is the number one cancer in Singapore. Nearly 2,000 Singapore residents are diagnosed with it every year.

While both men and women can get colorectal cancer, it is more common in



(Left) Dr Raghav Sundar is an associate consultant with the department of haematology-oncology at the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore.

men. Common symptoms of colorectal cancer include blood in the stools, a change in bowel habits, including diarrhoea or constipation lasting more than a month, persistent abdominal pain, weakness or fatigue and unintentional weight loss.

However, early cancer or polyps, which are growths in the colon that may turn cancerous over time, may have no symptoms.

The Ministry of Health suggests screening for colorectal cancer to start at age 50.

Patients with a higher risk of developing colorectal cancer, such as those with a family history of colorectal cancer or polyps, or personal history of colon polyps, may need to start screening earlier.

Screening is important as it can detect colon or rectal cancer earlier when it is easier to treat.

In some cases, patients who undergo screening may discover polyps that can be removed before they become cancerous.

Screening tests commonly per-



Singapore Cancer Society (SCS) volunteers showing residents how to use the colorectal cancer screening kit. PHOTO: SINGAPORE CANCER SOCIETY

formed here include colonoscopy or faecal immunochemical test (FIT). In a colonoscopy, the doctor looks at the entire length of the colon and rectum with a thin, flexible and lighted tube with a small video camera on the end.

Samples of unusual areas can be removed for testing (biopsies), and polyps can be removed during the procedure.

Medicine is commonly given to help patients relax and sleep while the procedure is done.

Colonoscopies are usually recommended once every 10 years.

The FIT can detect hidden blood in a stool sample, which may be due to colorectal polyps or cancer. To be effective, it must be performed every year and if tested positive, a colonoscopy is required.

➔ [tabla@sph.com.sg](mailto:tabla@sph.com.sg)

VARIOUS healthcare institutions and organisations run colorectal cancer awareness campaigns and screening drives, such as the NCIS Ribbon Challenge held on March 24. Early detection through screening saves lives. If signs and symptoms are present, do seek medical attention.

Source: Singapore Cancer Registry Annual Registry Report 2015

