

Vital to check for colorectal cancer: Doctor

It's a leading cause of cancer death here and is highly treatable when caught at early stage

RY-ANNELIM

Three in 100 Singaporeans will develop colorectal cancer in their lifetime, according to experts.

This makes the disease – cancer of the colon and rectum (or large intestine) – the most commonly diagnosed cancer in Singapore and a leading cause of cancer death among both men and women.

Dr Chee Cheng Ean, a medical oncologist at the National University Cancer Institute, told The New Paper that a total of 9,807 cases of colorectal cancer were diagnosed between 2011 and 2015.

Singapore also ranked 16th globally in terms of incidence rates, according to a 2012 research by Globocan, a database of cancer statistics worldwide.

In the US, a study from American Cancer Society researchers last year found that more young people – those aged 20 to 54 –

were dying of colorectal cancer than in previous decades.

Although studies have not confirmed it, Dr Chee suspects a similar trend here.

“The increased incidence of colorectal cancer in young and middle-aged adults may be related to diet and lifestyle,” she said.

“An important message to learn from the study is that young people can and do get colon and rectal cancer, so they should pay attention to signs and symptoms, and so should their doctors.”

RISK

Although it can occur at any age, people aged 50 and older have an increased risk of colorectal cancer, according to the Singapore Cancer Society.

The organisation believes that awareness of the disease is crucial as incidence rates soar.

March marks Colorectal Cancer Awareness month globally.

Despite the increase in cases



(Above) A colorectal cancer support group examining stoma bags. (Left) Dr Chee Cheng Ean, a medical oncologist at National University Cancer Institute

PHOTOS: SINGAPORE CANCER SOCIETY



abroad and here, Dr Chee said mortality rates have declined.

She attributed this to advancements in treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

“It thus allows for earlier detection and more timely treatment of the cancer at an earlier stage where treatment success rates are high,” she said.

Dr Chee added that colorectal cancer death rates dropped in part because of screenings too.

She said: “It is a fact that colorectal cancer screenings help people stay well and save lives.”

“In some cases, screenings find growths, called polyps, that can be removed before they become cancer.”

Besides seeing blood in their stool, other symptoms include cramping or abdominal pain, fatigue, unexplained weight loss and a change in bowel habits.

But Dr Chee stressed that early stage cancer may have no symptoms, resulting in it being described as a “silent killer”.

There are also many misconceptions about the cancer and its symptoms, such as how screening is unnecessary if you have regular bowel movements

and feel fine.

“Usually there are no symptoms to rely on. When there are, the cancer may already be at an advanced stage,” said Dr Chee.

“Colon cancer is preventable and highly treatable when caught at an early stage. People who are diagnosed at early stages have over a 90 per cent chance of a cure and surviving.”

Aside from screenings, especially when you reach the big 50, there are dietary and lifestyle habits that may help prevent colorectal cancer. It is important to maintain a healthy weight, avoid excessive alcohol, not smoke, eat greens and fruits, exercise regularly and limit consumption of fatty food and red and processed meat.

limmin@sp.com.sg