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Colorectal Surgery

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Q: I am 40 years old and my mother died from colon cancer in her late 40s. Am I likely to get colon cancer, and how can I prevent it?

Colon and rectal cancer has a very strong association with genetics and family history. With one “primary relative” (meaning a parent, sibling or child) with colorectal cancer, the risk of getting colorectal cancer is about two times greater.

A condition called “hereditary colorectal cancer” can lead to a much higher risk of developing colorectal cancer (100% in some cases) with an abnormally younger age of onset. Hereditary colorectal cancer syndromes run in families and can lead to many types of cancer aside from colorectal cancer, including cancer of the uterus or ovaries in women. It is important, therefore, to be informed about all cancers in your family history—not just about colorectal cancer.

An expert with particular interest in these conditions, such as a genetic counselor, specialized gastroenterologist and/or a colon and rectal surgeon can help assess your risk for cancer. Current studies are investigating whether standard colorectal cancer prevention strategies, such as eating healthy, watching your weight, exercising, avoiding tobacco products and limiting alcohol, also

help patients with hereditary syndromes avoid getting colorectal cancer. Additionally, there is research that shows that a daily aspirin, if approved by your primary care provider, can help reduce the colorectal cancer risk in some patients.

The most important step any patient can take is getting screened for colorectal cancer. Individuals age 50 and up without a family history of colorectal cancer or polyps are generally recommended to undergo a colonoscopy for cancer screening. This may be repeated every 10 years if the screening results are normal the first time. In higher risk cases, such as those with a family history of colorectal cancer, however, it may be recommended that colonoscopy and other testing begin earlier and be repeated more frequently. A board-certified colorectal surgeon can help you determine the best preventative plan for you.

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