Anatomy 101: The Colon and Rectum
Patient Education

The colon (also called the large intestine) is a long tube with muscular walls in the digestive system that connects the small intestine to the anus. After food digests in the small intestine, the remaining material travels through the colon. The last few inches of the colon are called the rectum.

What the Colon Does
The colon is the last step in food digestion. It absorbs water and nutrients from digested material and forms solid waste (stool) that leaves the body through the anus.

Colon Polyps
Throughout the body, new cells form to replace old, dead cells all the time. Sometimes new cells form when the body does not need them, or old cells do not die when they should. Extra cells can build up and form a mass of tissue inside the colon called a polyp. Polyps can be benign or malignant.

Benign polyps are not cancer. Often, doctors can remove them during a colonoscopy. In most cases, benign polyps do not come back after they are removed. Their cells do not spread to tissues around them or to other parts of the body.

Malignant polyps are cancer. They are usually more serious and, if not removed, may be life-threatening. Cancer cells can invade nearby tissues and organs, and can also break away from the tumor and enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system. That is how cancer spreads from the original (primary) tumor to form new tumors in other organs. The spread of cancer is called metastasis.

Cancer and the Colon
Cancer that starts in the colon is called colon cancer. Cancer that starts in the rectum is called rectal cancer. These types of cancers are also called colorectal cancer.

When cancer grows in the colon or rectum, one or more of these symptoms may occur:
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Feeling that your bowel does not empty completely
- Blood in your stool (either bright red or very dark)
- Stools that are narrower than usual
- Frequent gas pains
- Feeling full or bloated
- Losing weight for no known reason
- Feeling very tired all the time
- Nausea or vomiting

These symptoms do not necessarily mean colon cancer. Other health problems can cause these symptoms. Anyone with these symptoms should see a doctor as soon as possible.