

Patient education: Colon and rectal cancer (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer is cancer that affects the large intestine (also known as the colon) or the rectum ([figure 1](#)). The word "colorectal" is just a shortened way of saying colon and rectal.

Colorectal cancer can be serious. But there are many ways to treat it.

Is there a test for colorectal cancer?

Yes, there are a few tests that can find colorectal cancer. Your doctor or nurse can explain your choices.

If your doctor or nurse thinks you have colorectal cancer, he or she will probably suggest a test called a "colonoscopy." During a colonoscopy, the doctor inserts a tube and a tiny camera into your anus and up to your colon. That way, he or she can look for cancer or other problems.

What are the symptoms of colorectal cancer?

Colorectal cancer might not cause any symptoms at first. When it does cause symptoms, it can cause:

- Stomach pain
- A change in your bowel movements (number, texture, or size)
- Blood in your bowel movements
- Feeling weak or tired

How is colorectal cancer treated?

Most types of colorectal cancer are treated with one or more of these:

- Surgery to remove the part of the colon or rectum that has cancer
- Chemotherapy, which is the medical term for medicines that kill cancer cells or stop them from growing.
- Radiation therapy

Will my body work normally after surgery?

That depends on what type of surgery you have. If your doctor can reconnect your colon or rectum after removing the part with cancer, you should be able to have bowel movements normally. But if your doctor cannot reconnect your colon or rectum, he or she will make a hole in your belly and attach the end of the colon or a loop of intestine to that hole. The hole is called a "colostomy." Your bowel movements will come out through the opening into a bag that is glued to your skin.

Some people need to have a colostomy only for a short time, called a "temporary colostomy." Then they can have another surgery to reconnect their colon or rectum. Other people need to have a colostomy for the rest of their life. This is called a "permanent colostomy." If you need a colostomy, your doctor or nurse will put you in touch with people who can help you learn how to manage.

What happens after treatment?

After you finish treatment, you should see your doctor or nurse every so often for a few years. That way he or she can check to see if the cancer comes back. You will probably have to have blood tests every so often, a few more colonoscopy tests, plus a special kind of X-ray called a "CT scan." Your doctor or nurse will also talk to you about your mood, stress level, sex life, eating and exercise habits, and any other problems you might have after finishing treatment.

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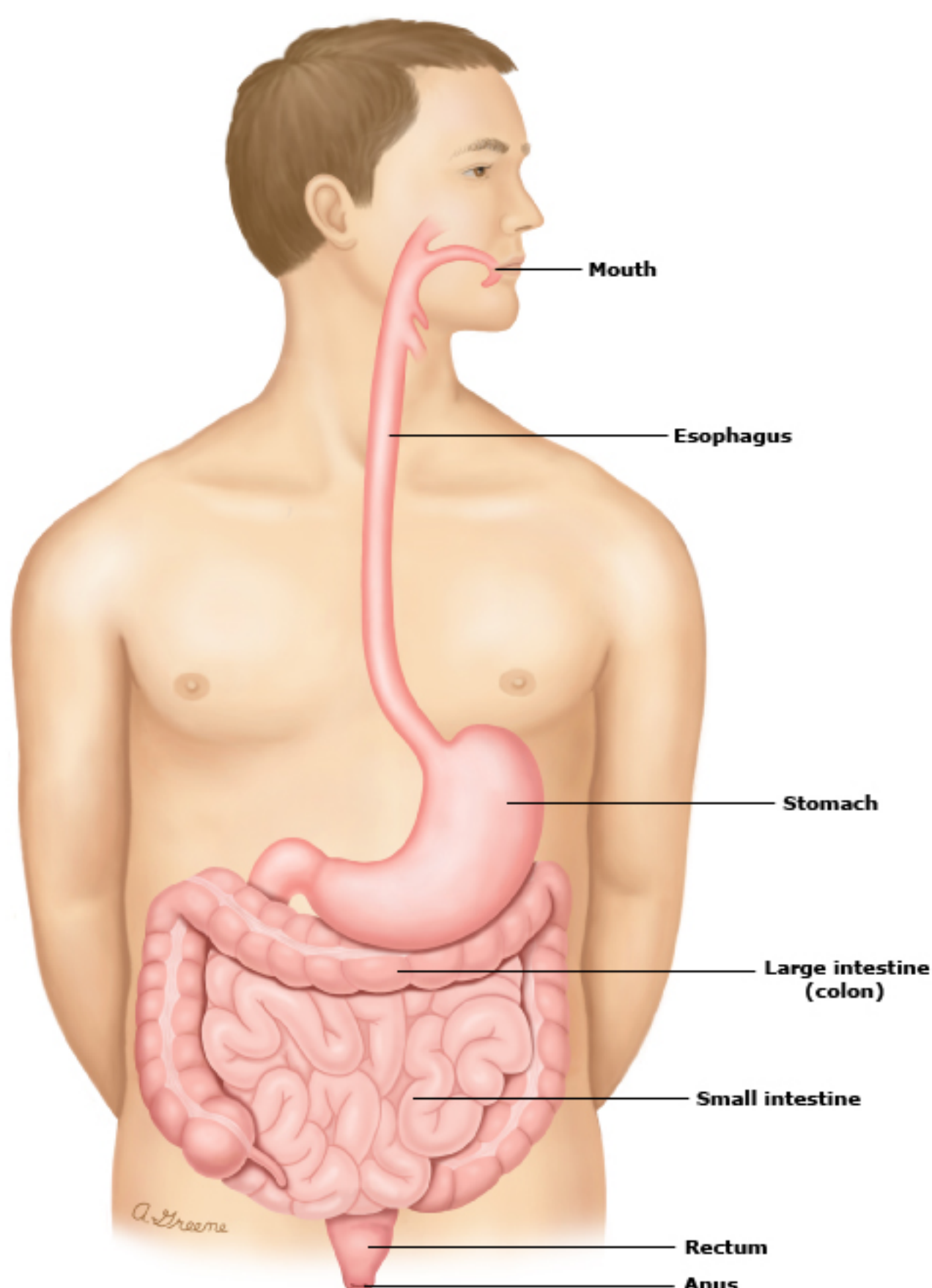
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GRAPHICS

Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called "the digestive system," or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

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