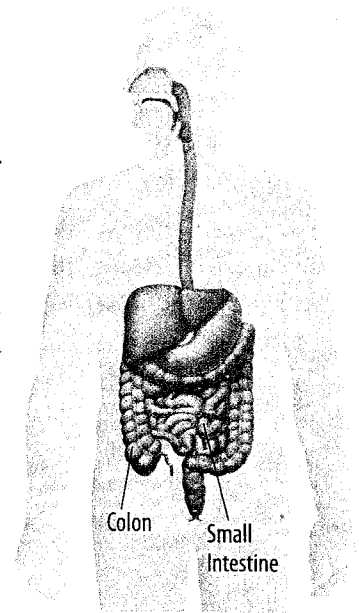


Understanding the Colon

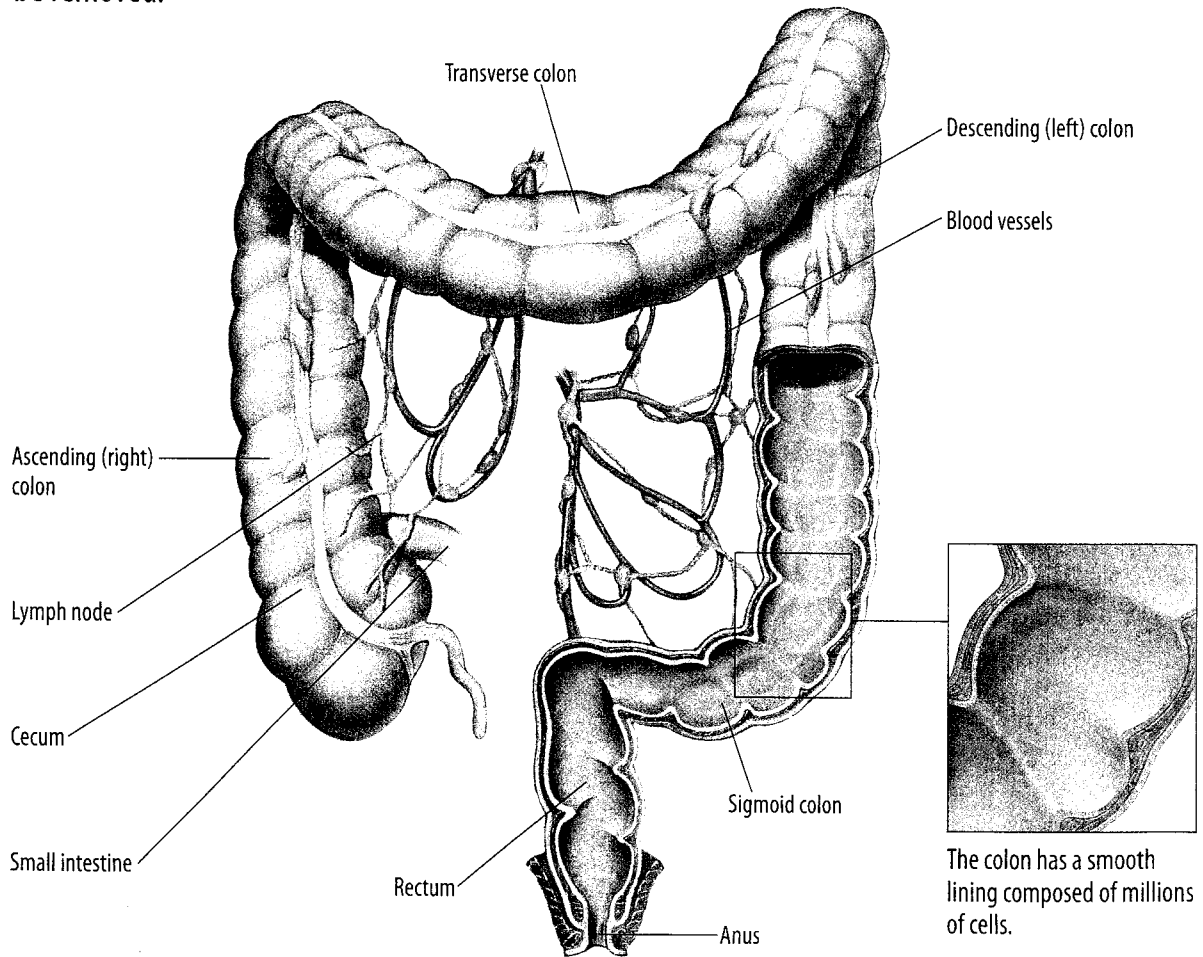
The **colon** (also called the large intestine) is a muscular tube that forms the last part of the digestive tract. It absorbs water and stores food waste. The colon is about 4 to 6 feet long. The **rectum** is the last 6 inches of the colon. The colon and rectum have a smooth lining composed of millions of cells. Changes in these cells can lead to growths in the colon that can become cancerous and should be removed.

How the Colon Works

Semiliquid food waste from the small intestine enters the colon at the cecum (beginning of the colon). As this waste (stool) travels through the colon, it loses water and solidifies. Strong muscles keep the stool moving through the colon. The stool is moved toward the sigmoid colon (last section of the colon). From there, it passes into the rectum, where it is stored until it leaves the body during a bowel movement.



Parts of the Colon



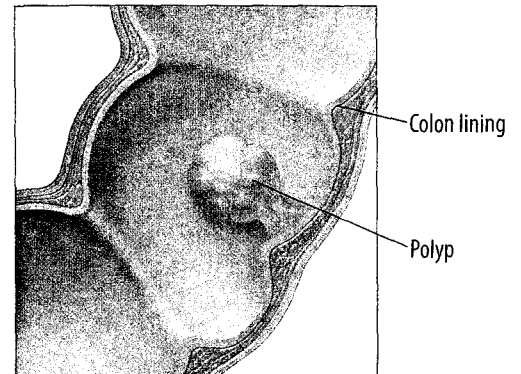
The colon has a smooth lining composed of millions of cells.

When the Colon Lining Changes

Changes that occur in the cells that line the colon or rectum can lead to growths called **polyps**. Over a period of years, polyps can turn cancerous. Removing polyps early may prevent cancer from ever forming.

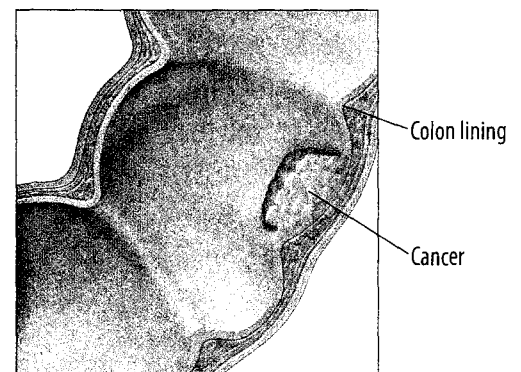
Polyps

Polyps are fleshy clumps of tissue that form on the lining of the colon or rectum. Small polyps are usually **benign** (not cancerous). However, over time, cells in a polyp can change and become cancerous. The larger a polyp grows, the more likely this is to happen. Also, certain types of polyps known as **adenomatous polyps** are considered **pre-malignant**. This means that they will almost always become cancerous if they're not removed.



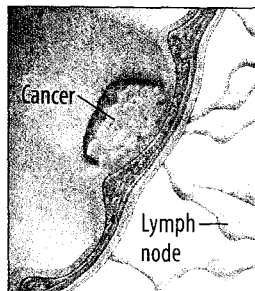
Cancer

Almost all colorectal cancers start when polyp cells begin growing abnormally. As a cancerous tumor grows, it may involve more and more of the colon or rectum. In time, cancer can also grow beyond the colon or rectum and spread to nearby organs or to glands called lymph nodes. The cells can also travel to other parts of the body. This is known as metastasis. The earlier a cancerous tumor is removed, the better the chance of preventing its spread.

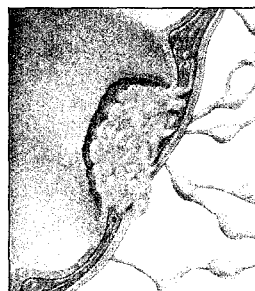


Staging Colorectal Cancer

Staging cancer determines whether it has spread, and if so, how far. Knowing the cancer stage helps the doctor make the best treatment plan. Colorectal cancer has four stages, based on the location of the tumor. Staging may be done before or during surgery.



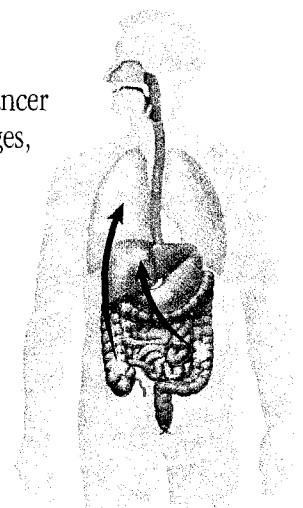
Stage I: Cancer found only in the colon or rectum lining.



Stage II: Cancer has spread outside the colon or rectum to nearby tissue, but not to lymph nodes.



Stage III: Cancer has spread to nearby lymph nodes, but not to other parts of the body.



Stage IV: Cancer cells have traveled to distant organs such as the lungs and liver.