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Almost half of colorectal cancers are found after they have already spread despite availability of screening programs, new report finds

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TORONTO -

About 1 in 2 colorectal cancers in Canada are diagnosed after they have spread to lymph nodes or other parts of the body, even though most provinces and territories have screening programs designed to catch the disease early or before it starts, according to a new report released today by the Canadian Cancer Society (CCS).

The report – Canadian Cancer Statistics: A 2018 special report on cancer incidence by stage – was produced in partnership with the Public Health Agency of Canada and Statistics Canada in collaboration with the provincial and territorial cancer registries.

Colorectal cancer is the second most commonly diagnosed cancer in Canada and the second leading cause of cancer death, accounting for an estimated 9,400 deaths in 2017 alone. The 5-year survival rate for colorectal cancer diagnosed at stage 4 is less than 15%. But that rate increases to 90% when it is diagnosed earlier, at stage 1. Fewer Canadians would die from this disease if more were screened.

"What's troubling is that participation rates in colorectal cancer screening programs are low," says Dr Leah Smith, Senior Manager of Surveillance at CCS. "Increasing the number of people who are screened could have a significant impact for colorectal cancer in Canada. Not only can screening increase the chances of survival by detecting colorectal cancer early, when it's most treatable, it can also detect precancerous growths so they can be removed before they turn into cancer. This makes colorectal cancer screening a powerful prevention tool."

CCS strongly encourages people to talk to their healthcare professional about what cancer screening options are right for them. In general, we recommend that Canadians aged 50 to 74 who are not at high risk for colorectal cancer get screened every 2 years with a simple at-home stool test.

"Colorectal cancer can be prevented and treated, which makes education and awareness about its risk factors—such as unhealthy eating, physical inactivity, and smoking—so



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important. I encourage all Canadians to get informed and to take steps to lower their risk of developing colorectal cancer, including speaking with their healthcare professionals about screening options," said the Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Health. "The Government of Canada is committed to working with partners, including the Canadian Cancer Society, to continue to promote screening programs and to educate Canadians about how to reduce their cancer risk."

More about colorectal screening tests

Screening for colorectal cancer is easy and convenient. It starts with a test that checks your stool for blood. Polyps or tumours in the colon have blood vessels that can release a small amount of blood onto the stool. Stool tests check for this hidden blood, which you can't see with your eyes. Having blood in your stool doesn't always mean that you have polyps or cancer. If a stool test shows traces of blood in the stool, more tests need to be done to find out where the bleeding is coming from and why.

"These simple at-home tests help prevent cancers and cancer deaths," says Dr Smith. "Colorectal cancer responds best when it is found and treated early. You should be screened even if you feel healthy."

One survivor's story

Jeff Orson, a Toronto based singer songwriter, knew something was wrong when he began losing sleep and feeling exhausted. Because Jeff was in his 50s, his doctor asked him to get a stool test.

After a positive result, he was referred for a colonoscopy, which revealed troubling news. Jeff had stage 2 colon cancer. He had surgery to remove his tumour and is now cancer-free. He hopes to spread the word about the importance of screening.

"I encourage everyone to take charge of their own health and talk to their doctor about screening," says Jeff. "Don't wait until you have symptoms like I did. I was lucky that my cancer was caught early and had not spread beyond my colon. If my doctor had not recommended the stool test, who knows where I would be today. I will never take my health for granted again."

More about colorectal cancer screening in Canada

CCS is a strong supporter of organized cancer screening programs. In Canada, these programs are managed by the provinces and territories. While the programs differ across the country, each includes promotional strategies to target eligible Canadians, follow-up guidelines, and ways to monitor and evaluate the program. Currently, organized colorectal



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cancer screening programs are available in all provinces except Quebec. They are also available in Yukon.

Unfortunately, the high percentage of late-stage diagnoses for this disease suggests that these programs are not reaching their full potential yet. Participation rates vary by province, and none are meeting the target of at least 60%.

More about cancer staging

Staging is a way to classify a cancer based on how much disease is in the body and the spread of the disease at the time of diagnosis. Cancers are usually assigned a stage from 1 to 4. Generally, the higher the number, the more the cancer has spread.

This new report includes information on cancer stage at diagnosis for 20 cancers with a focus on the top 4 most commonly diagnosed cancers (lung, colorectal, female breast and prostate) and cervical cancer. Nationwide stage data have only recently become available, representing more than 25 years of hard work across the provincial and territorial cancer registries, Statistics Canada and their partners.

Other key findings in the special report

- More than 80% of female breast cancers are diagnosed at an early stage (stage 1 or 2).
- 68% of cervical cancers are found at an early stage.
- Almost 75% of prostate cancers are found at an early stage.
- About half of lung cancers are diagnosed after they have spread to another part of the body (stage 4).

About Canadian Cancer Statistics

Canadian Cancer Statistics is prepared through a partnership of the Canadian Cancer Society, the Public Health Agency of Canada and Statistics Canada in collaboration with the provincial and territorial cancer registries. For more than 30 years, this publication has been providing information that helps decide what support and services are needed and what research should be done. It also helps assess the impact of prevention, early detection and treatment.

About the Canadian Cancer Society

The Canadian Cancer Society is a national, community-based organization of volunteers whose mission is to eradicate cancer and enhance the quality of life of people living with



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cancer. Thanks to our donors and volunteers, CCS has the most impact, against the most cancers, in the most communities in Canada. Building on our progress, we are working with Canadians to change cancer forever. To learn more about cancer, visit cancer.ca or call our toll-free, bilingual Cancer Information Service at 1-888-939-3333 (TTY 1-866-786-3934).