guard against COLORECTAL CANCER
HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

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News anchor Katie Couric has something in common with actors Terrence Howard, Jimmy Smits, and Diane Keaton. They’ve all raised public awareness of colorectal cancer—the third most common form of cancer in the U.S.—and of the importance of appropriate screening.

The symptoms of colorectal cancer are subtle—if any occur at all. That’s why regular screenings—from annual tests for blood in the stool to a colonoscopy every decade—are so important in detecting this slow-to-develop cancer.

**SIGNS AND RISK FACTORS**
The most likely warning signs include abdominal bloating or discomfort, blood in or on the stool, changes in bowel movements (persistent constipation or diarrhea; feeling that the bowel doesn’t empty completely), long or thin pencil-shaped stools, pelvic pain, and unexplained fatigue (particularly when accompanied by loss of appetite or weight loss).

Because most colorectal cancer occurs in people over 50, age is considered a risk factor, though research also suggests that genes may play a role. Being overweight, abusing alcohol, smoking, having inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn’s disease or ulcerative colitis) or diabetes, and eating a diet high in saturated and trans fats also increase the risk.

**PREVENTIVE STEPS**
Making healthful lifestyle changes may lessen the risk for colorectal cancer by as much as 70 percent in some individuals. For example, a recent study published in the *British Journal of Cancer* shows that women who walk the most have a 23 percent lower risk of colon cancers when compared with those who walk the least.

The protective mechanism may be physical activity’s role in lowering colonic bile acid levels. Whatever the reason for exercise’s protective effects, “Physical activity is at the top of the list of ways that you can reduce your risk of colon cancer,” researcher Kathleen Y. Wolin, ScD, told *ScienceDaily*.

What ends up in the large intestine and how long wastes remain there also play a critical role. Avoid refined foods (white bread, pasta, and especially sugar). Instead of red meat (linked to colorectal cancer in several studies) consume cold-water fish and legumes for protein.

Brightly colored fruits and vegetables are rich in antioxidants and other cancer-protective substances such as the folate found in leafy greens. Indole-3-carbinol, a compound found in cruciferous veggies, can inhibit the growth of colon cancer cells.

And these plant foods—along with whole

DID YOU KNOW?
A simple blood test can now detect colorectal cancer and colorectal adenomas (precancerous growths), according to the 7th annual Gastrointestinal Cancers Symposium. This test may be particularly useful in identifying people who would most benefit from colonoscopy.
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grains—contribute fiber, which keeps what you eat moving smoothly through the digestive tract. A number of studies show decreases in colorectal cancer risk with increased fiber intake. One recent study suggests that fiber produces the short-chain fatty acid butyrate, which can combat this cancer right where it starts. Beneficial bacteria (or probiotics) also play a role in preventing colon cancer and supporting the body’s natural immunity.

**Protective Supplements**

In addition to eating yogurt with live, active cultures, consider taking probiotic supplements to stall cancer. Preliminary evidence suggests that probiotics may even help to reduce the recurrence of tumors in people who have had colon cancers surgically removed.

British scientists find that people with the highest levels of vitamin D have a 40 percent lower risk for colorectal cancer than those with the lowest levels of the “sunshine vitamin.”

“There is now quite a lot of evidence from studying populations that people who have low levels of vitamin D are more likely to develop bowel cancer,” says Panagiota Mitrou, PhD, science program manager for the World Cancer Research Fund International.

A number of other supplements are also proving protective. Taking psyllium (*Plantago ovata*) for additional fiber appeared to lower colorectal cancer mortality in Spanish research. Just be sure to drink more water throughout the day when you raise your fiber intake.

Omega-3 fats from fish and flaxseed oils are linked to slower growth of colon cancer cells. Both quercetin and resveratrol also appear to slow colon cancer development. Last but hardly least, take a multivitamin/mineral formula daily with vitamins A, B complex, C, E, and trace minerals.

Don’t forget herbs. The *Journal of Nutrition* points to the potential of aged garlic (*Allium sativum*) extract in halting colorectal cancer cell growth. Medicinal mushrooms also appear to be protective. A known antitumor agent, maitake (*Grifola frondosa*) alleviates colon inflammation, which can lead to cancer. Research with meshima (*Phellinus linteus*) mushroom shows that its polysaccharides can also inhibit the growth of colon cancer cells.

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**SELECTED SOURCES**