Lifestyle choices ‘cut colon cancer risk’

Study shows factors like exercise, diet can help lower risk dramatically

By POON CHIAN HUI

SIX to eight hours of sleep, 1.5 hours of intense physical activity a week and a diet high in fruit and vegetables – these lifestyle choices can slash the risk of colon cancer by as much as 75 per cent.

The latest findings from the Singapore Chinese Health Study, which tracked 50,466 Chinese Singaporeans, were published last December in the international journal Cancer Prevention Research. Each person in the study was tracked for about 11 years.

According to the study, it takes an all-round healthy lifestyle to cut the risk of the disease to the minimum.

And that means a healthy diet instead of consuming lots of meat, fast food and soft drinks; keeping a healthy body Mass Index; avoiding alcohol and cigarettes; getting enough sleep and also enough intense physical exercise such as jogging, cycling uphill or manual labour like moving furniture.

Those who practise only one or two of these six lifestyle factors will not get the full 75 per cent cut in risk of colon cancer.

However, the study did not find a clear trend for rectal cancer, which occurs in the rectum instead of the big intestine.

Overall, colorectal cancer – which includes colon and rectal cancers – ranks as Singapore’s top cancer with 8,459 new cases diagnosed between 2007 and 2011, up from the 8,206 cases in the preceding five years.

Only one in 10 of those in the Singapore study managed to achieve the 1.5 hours of vigorous exercise needed a week – which Associate Professor Koh Woon Puy, who was involved in the study, called “disappointing”. She was speaking to reporters yesterday at a press briefing to discuss the study.

Prof Koh, who is from the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at the National University of Singapore, said the study also suggested that physical activities commonly pursued by the elderly, such as brisk walking and tai-chi, may not be enough to protect against colon cancer.

One possible reason is that these exercises do not increase the heart rate significantly.

Prof Koh added that this is the first non-Western population study linking lifestyle factors to colorectal cancer.

Participants were recruited between 1993 and 1998 from public housing estates islandwide. They were between 45 and 74 years old and none had been diagnosed with colorectal cancer then.

Of the 50,466 studied, about 2 per cent or 969 developed the disease by 2008. Each person was then given a score based on their lifestyle.

While the prevalence of the disease is the highest among the Chinese, Prof Koh believes the results can apply to the other races as well.

This is because colorectal cancer has been strongly linked to lifestyle habits all over the world, instead of genetic pre-disposition.

Some 95 per cent of cases are said to occur in people with no family history of the disease, she pointed out. “There is now real incentive to tell people to improve their lifestyle habits,” Prof Koh said.

But Dr Francis Seow-Choen, medical director of Fortis Colorectal Hospital in Adam Road, said people should not believe they are immune to the cancer just because they practise healthy habits.

“Some people may think that by doing these things, they will not get colorectal cancer. This I find disturbing,” he said.

“As colorectal surgeons, we see a lot of patients who fulfill everything listed and yet are diagnosed with colon cancer,” he added.

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