

Colorectal Cancer Awareness and Prevention

By
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The fact is that anyone can be afflicted with cancer. This is made all too apparent when popular celebrities either face cancer themselves or they lose a loved one to cancer. Organizations like the American Cancer Society try to get the word- and the facts- about colon cancer, out to the community. You may be surprised how prevalent colon cancer is in our population compared with how easy it is to detect and prevent.

Some Facts About Colon Cancer:

- ☐ Colorectal cancer is second only to lung cancer as the leading cause of cancer deaths in the US.
- ☐ If diagnosed early, colon cancer is almost 90% curable.
- ☐ Men and women are equally at risk for colon cancer.
- ☐ About 70% to 80% of all colorectal cancers occur among people considered “average risk.” Adults become “average risk” at age 50 and should begin screening.
- ☐ About 25-30% of adults at age 50 have precancerous polyps, the precursor lesions for almost all colorectal cancers.

Additionally, last year the American College of Gastroenterologists (www.acg.gi.org) issued a recommendation that African-Americans begin colorectal cancer screening 5 years earlier than the general population, or at age 45.

What Causes Colon Cancer?

There are no known causes of colon cancer. However, several risk factors can increase a person's chances of developing cancer:

Family History - If you have close relatives (parent, brother or sister, or child) who have had this cancer, your risk is increased.

Age - Your risk increases after you turn 50. 90% of all colon cancer occurs in people age 50 and older.

Making important lifestyle changes can reduce your risk of getting colon cancer. Avoid a DIET that is high in animal fat, EXERCISE regularly, if you smoke – quit and AVOID HEAVY USE OF ALCOHOL.

Symptoms of Colon Cancer

In its early stage, colon cancer usually has NO SYMPTOMS. In most cases, the cancers develop slowly over a period of years, most beginning as a polyp.

Symptoms of more advanced disease can include:

- ☐ A change in bowel habits such as diarrhea, constipation or narrowing of the stool that lasts for more than a few days

- ☐ A feeling that you need to have a bowel movement that doesn't go away even after doing so
- ☐ Bleeding from the rectum or blood in the stool (often the stool will look normal)
- ☐ Unexplained weight loss
- ☐ Cramping or steady stomach pain
- ☐ Weakness and tiredness

These symptoms do not mean you have cancer but to be sure, talk to a qualified specialist about a screening. The goal of screening is to FIND polyps and cancers before they cause symptoms and PREVENT some cancers by detection and removal of polyps .

Since early colon cancer usually has no symptoms, choosing to get a screening exam is one of the most important decisions you can make to reduce your risks. In the absence of symptoms, a screening can find colorectal cancers at an early stage with the best chances of successful treatment. Detecting and removing the polyp early may prevent it from becoming cancer.

The American Cancer Society recommends that starting at age 50, men and women considered “average risk” should be screened for colon cancer.

The frequency of these screening tests is based on adults with average risk. Men and women with increased or high risk should be tested earlier and more frequently. Bottom line, if you are 50 or older, or if you have greater risk factor of colon cancer, you need to be tested. There is no good excuse!

Too often, colon cancer is not detected early and will grow and spread unnoticed. In many cases, by the time people experience any symptoms the cancer is advanced and difficult to treat. As a result of not enough people getting tested, only 38% of all cases are diagnosed early when treatment is so successful.

Why aren't patients getting tested? Usually, they feel embarrassed or don't know what to expect and never make their appointments for an exam that could save their life.

The most reliable “gold standard” screening test for colorectal cancer is a colonoscopy, a visual examination of the large intestine (colon) using a lighted, flexible endoscope. The procedure is always done in a private room and the patient's privacy is a top concern.

Patients are lightly sedated to help them relax and often go to sleep during the procedure. The endoscope is inserted through the anus and moved gently around the bends of the colon. A video screen displays the images from inside the colon. If a polyp is detected, a thin wire snare is used to painlessly remove it. The procedure takes 15 to 30 minutes and the patient seldom remembers the procedure.

Removing polyps prevents colorectal cancer from ever starting. Don't let misinformation and a misplaced sense of modesty stop you from getting an exam that could save your life!

As part of Medicare's new effort to pay more attention to preventing disease instead of just treating it, doctors can refer patients for important preventive tests including screenings for cancer.

Most insurance carriers will cover part or all of the costs of screening exams. Check with your individual plan to see what is covered and how often.

Where you have your test performed can make a big difference in the amount you pay out of pocket. Ambulatory surgery centers that specialize in endoscopic procedures and offer state of the art equipment, typically offer much lower costing procedures than hospitals.

For the sake of your health and for the sake of those who care about you, receive these reminders and take the steps to schedule your screening exam.