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Prevent Colon Cancer Through Screening

In 2006, approximately 55,000 people died of colon cancer, the nation's second-leading cancer. Those deaths accounted for about 10 percent of all cancer deaths that year.

Colon cancer is dangerous because it is generally silent at first. Most people do not know that they have it until it has reached advanced stages. At that point, it is often hard to treat the cancer.

The good news is most colon cancer is preventable. Doctors understand how it starts, they know what to look for and have the ability to eliminate the precursors.

The vast majority of colon cancer develops from polyps of an abnormal growth of tissues projecting from the colon lining. Colon polyps are benign tumors that grow on the large intestine. Benign polyps are not life threatening and can easily be removed during a colonoscopy.

However, if a benign polyp is not removed, it can become malignant over time. Progression of a benign polyp to a malignant one can take up to 10 years. Approximately one out of 100 polyps can eventually turn into cancer.

PREVENTION AND DETECTION

Studies show that colon cancer screening decreases the individual's risk of colon cancer by up to 90 percent. It is recommended that both men and women 50 years of age and older should begin regular screenings and, depending on family history, possibly younger.

An average person's risk of having colon cancer in their lifetime is about 5 percent. Of that, 90 percent of colon cancer occurs after age 50.

PREVENTION AND DETECTION PROCEDURES INCLUDE:

Colonoscopy. A colonoscopy is the gold standard for colon cancer screening. It requires a one-day cleansing prep that consists of a special diet and laxative. Normally it is an outpatient procedure, but patients are instructed not to drive or go to work due to medications that cause drowsiness.

If results are good, it is recommended to have this procedure done once every 10 years. This procedure poses some risks that include bleeding, heart and lung complications or risk of bowel perforation. Medical specialists agree that the benefits of a colonoscopy far outweigh the risk in most people.

Sigmoidoscopy. A sigmoidoscopy is an alternative to the colonoscopy because general internists are able to do this procedure. Especially in rural parts of the country, where gastroenterologists are not available, a sigmoidoscopy is considered the next best alternative.

There is a downside to the sigmoidoscopy. This procedure only looks at one-third of, or at best, one half of the colon. If this is the selected choice of screening, this procedure should be done once every five years.

Barium enema. The barium enema is an outpatient procedure that requires a one-day colon cleansing prep. It is an x-ray study that allows the doctor to watch the digestive track's functionality and look for any unique disruptions in its flow. If a problem is found, the patient will need to have a traditional colonoscopy.

Fecal occult blood test. This procedure checks for hidden, or occult, blood in the stool. The test can provide clues as to subtle blood loss in the gastrointestinal tract.

Blood loss in the stool is a potential symptom of colon cancer. If found, more rigorous investigation, such as a colonoscopy, is necessary.

This procedure is generally done on all patients over age 50 during yearly physicals.

Virtual colonoscopy. A VC is a medical imaging procedure that includes getting a CAT scan. A computer software program formats the images into 2-D and 3-D images of the colon. Because it is a newer technology, and because of insurance company reimbursement issues, it has not become a widely accepted procedure.

However, the data is accurate and does as good of a job detecting significant polyps as a traditional colonoscopy. Once doctors are able to determine how often individuals should be tested as well as work out other elements, virtual colonoscopy may become widely accepted and utilized.

RISK FACTORS

The use of alcohol and tobacco as well as obesity increases an individual's risk of getting colon cancer. To prevent colon cancer, regular exercise and a healthy diet consisting of fruits, vegetables, and foods low in fat and high in fiber, folate and calcium are all recommended.

In addition, studies show that hormone replacement therapy, statins (cholesterol-lowering medications) and aspirin all contribute to a healthier colon.

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