

March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month

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March is colon cancer awareness month. Colo-rectal cancer is the 2nd leading cancer killer in the United States (second to lung cancer) Colorectal cancer affects both men and women of all racial & ethnic groups. It is most often found in people aged 50 or greater.

Early in the disease there may not be any warning signs. Colo-rectal cancer first develops with few if any symptoms. However, if symptoms are present they could include:

- 1) Blood in or on the stool
- 2) Change in bowel habits (including diarrhea or constipation)
- 3) Stools that is narrower than usual
- 4) General unexplained stomach pains
- 5) Frequent gas, abdominal pain, pain or indigestion
- 6) Unexpected weight loss
- 7) Chronic fatigue
- 8) Change in appetite

Screening exams can find polyps which are pre-cancerous. Therefore screening is very important. Polyps are abnormal growths in the colon or rectum. If found early polyps can be removed before turning into cancer. (done as an outpatient usually in doctor's office , surgery center, or hospital) Lifestyle factors that may contribute to increased risk of colo-rectal cancer include:

- 1) Lack of regular physical activity
- 2) Low fruit and vegetable intake
- 3) Low fiber and increased fat diet
- 4) Overweight and obesity
- 5) Alcohol consumption
- 6) Tobacco use

The risk of developing colo-rectal cancer increases with advancing age. More than 90% of cases are people aged 50 or older. Other risk factors include: inflammatory bowel disease, personal or family history of rectal cancer or polyps (risk is higher if it is a sibling or parent) or certain hereditary syndromes.

Common screening procedures include the following:

- 1) Digital rectal exam (done in doctor's office and is usually painless)
- 2) Fecal occult blood test (checks your stool sample for hidden blood & can be done at home using a special kit)

- 3) Flexible sigmoidoscopy (typically done in the doctor's office.)
If abnormality is found (polyp or mass) it is recommended that you under a colonoscopy
- 4) Colonoscopy (most comprehensive and sensitive test) It allows the doctor to see all of your large intestine. The day before you will be asked to undergo a bowel prep. You will receive sedation to make you comfortable.

Screening helps to find colo-rectal cancers at early stages. When treatment can lead to a cure. If you have questions or concerns contact your primary care physician or local gastroenterologist. Your good health depends on it.