

**Super Colon Strives For Super Awareness**  
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The good news about colon cancer is that it is one of the most preventable – and most treatable – cancers when detected early. The not-so-good news is that less than 40 percent of people in the United States who should be screened for colon cancer are not being screened.

During March, which marks the observance of national colorectal cancer awareness month, you'll probably notice print, radio and TV public service announcement campaigns to help increase awareness of colon cancer screening. Some of the national efforts are coming here to Solano County as part of the 2008 Super Colon Tour. The Super Colon is an 8-foot tall, 20-foot long replica of a human colon that will be on display March 1<sup>st</sup> at Sutter Solano Cancer Center in conjunction with efforts to increase screening rates and decrease death rates from colon cancer.

**The Case for Colorectal Cancer Screening**

Screening is by far the best way to prevent colon cancer from progressing and improve survival rates, and colonoscopy is absolutely the best way to detect colon cancers. It is an extremely effective and proven screening method and it's well worth it when you consider that it can save your life.

The American Cancer Society tells us that nationally more than 153,000 cases of colorectal cancer were estimated to be diagnosed in 2007 with more than 50,000 of those projected to die from the disease. In California in 2007, there were nearly 15,000 new cases of colorectal cancer diagnosed with more than 5,000 deaths attributed to the disease.

The real tragedy is that so many of these cancers are preventable or curable. Efforts to inform and educate the public and underserved communities about colon cancer are one of the reasons for exhibits such as the Super Colon Tour.

**Cut the Risk, Catch the Polyp**

Colon cancer is one of the most easily prevented cancers because it can develop from polyps (growths in the colon—or large intestine) that can be removed before they become cancerous.

One of the biggest factors working in our favor is that polyps are slow-growing “creatures,” so most people don't need a colonoscopy until they turn 50. Patients at high risk for colon cancer may need to start earlier.

It's well established clinically that 90 percent of colon cancer cases occur in people age 50 and older. Polyps discovered during colonoscopy can be removed before they can

become cancerous, and even if cancerous growths are discovered, the five-year survival rate for colon cancer is greater than 90 percent when it is diagnosed at an early, localized stage. That's why national and local awareness campaigns are focused on the fact that less than 40 percent of colon cancers are diagnosed at an early stage.

In Solano County, for example, American Cancer Society statistics show that approximately 71 percent of colon cancers detected are already late stage (more advanced). Without screening, colon cancer is usually not discovered until the presence of outward symptoms such as blood in the stool, a change in bowels habits or severe pain from a bowel obstruction. As a result, colon cancer is the second deadliest cancer in the U.S.

### **It's Critical to Be Screened**

While we're learning more and more about prevention in terms of diet and lifestyle, colonoscopy is absolutely the best way to detect colon cancers because it can visualize the entire length of the colon, remove suspicious growths and examine them in the lab to determine whether or not they are cancerous. The colonoscopy is simply the best screening method out there, and the more that physicians and the medical community can talk openly to patients about the procedure and help them understand the process, the less apprehensive people will be about the screening.

Other screening options include flexible sigmoidoscopy (which looks at the lower part of the colon) and the fecal occult blood test (a test for blood in the stool). Although these alternative methods are not as thorough or accurate as a traditional colonoscopy, any screening modality is better than none.

### **Education and Awareness**

As a physician, it's rewarding to see the great strides that are being made in early detection and cure rates for colon and other cancers. However, I also see the all-too-real consequences of not getting screened for colon cancer due to avoiding the procedure or simple lack of access to health care. In my work as a radiation oncologist, I can provide emotional support and medical therapy to those dealing with colon cancer diagnosis, but I can't turn back the hands of time.

The high rate of late stage colon cancer detection in Solano and some other California counties shows we have a lot more work to do when it comes to awareness and early detection, and it's a major factor behind educational efforts such as the Super Colon Tour.

Colon cancer is very preventable, and we know that screening saves lives. That's why physicians and the organizations we work for must continue to work at the community level to help spread that message and complement state and national awareness efforts during National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month.