

Solano Coalition for Better Health – contact Nancy Hopkins

What You Should Know About Colon Cancer

By Patricia Seid, M.D

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 U.S. who should be screened for colon cancer are not.

The Case for Colorectal Cancer Screening

Screening is the best way to prevent colon cancer from progressing to improve survival rates, and colonoscopy is the most direct and thorough screening method.

According to the American Cancer Society more than 153,000 cases of colorectal cancer were diagnosed in 2007 with more than 50,000 of those projected to die from the disease. In California, there were nearly 15,000 new cases of diagnosed with more than 5,000 deaths. The real tragedy is that so many of these cancers are preventable or curable.

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. 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 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 the earliest stage. In Solano County, 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, screening is the best way to detect colon cancers. Colonoscopy is the only method that can visualize the entire length of the colon. Suspicious growths and polyps can be removed and examined in the lab to determine whether or not they are cancerous.

Other screening options which improve detection and survival from colorectal cancer are flexible sigmoidoscopy (which looks at the lower part of the colon) and the fecal occult

blood test (a test for blood in the stool). Remember that any screening modality leads to improved survival.

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