



HEALTH NEWS FROM DR. YU

Thurston County Public Health & Social Services Department

Colon Cancer Awareness

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Colon cancer is one of those topics seldom discussed among friends, families, at parties, or at the dinner table. However, there are good reasons to talk about colon cancer and be aware of how to reduce your risks for this disease.

Over 150,000 new colon cancers are diagnosed each year in the U.S. Colon cancer affects men and women equally, is highly preventable, and can be detected before there are symptoms. Abnormal growths on the wall of the colon, called polyps, are usually non-cancerous and cause no symptoms until they became cancerous.

- Early stage cancers and polyps usually do not have any symptoms.
- Late stage colon cancers can cause bleeding, unexplained anemia, changes in bowel habits such as constipation or diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, and weight loss.

To decrease your risk for colon cancer: eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, limit red meat to less than 2 servings per week, take daily calcium and Vitamin D, avoid smoking and excessive alcohol, exercise regularly, and maintain a normal weight.

Early detection of colon cancer helps ensure the best possible outcome if you were to develop polyps or cancerous lesions. The optimal age to start screening depends on ethnicity, family, and personal history. Beginning at age 50, all men and women should be screened for colon cancer, even if they have no symptoms. Because of a higher incidence of colon cancer, African-Americans should start screening at 45, as well as people with inflammatory bowel disease or rare inherited colorectal cancer syndromes. Smoking, obesity, and a sedentary lifestyle also increase your risk for colorectal cancer. Those with a family history of colon cancer should start screening at an age 10 years younger than the age the family member was when that person was diagnosed with colon cancer.

There are a variety of tests that detect polyps early, before you have any symptoms. These include colonoscopy, flexible sigmoidoscopy, or a Barium enema. A "hemoccult test" can detect minute amounts of blood in your stool. It is a test you perform at home and send back to a laboratory. If positive, a colonoscopy will then be done to make sure the bleeding is not from a cancerous polyp. To figure out what test is right for you, discuss your options with your primary health provider.

The best way to detect polyps early and prevent colon cancer is by having a screening colonoscopy. During a colonoscopy, a specially trained physician passes a slender endoscope through the rectum into the colon to look for abnormalities such as polyps. Most polyps found during colonoscopy can be completely removed. Removal of these

polyps reduces the likelihood of developing colon cancer in the future. This is almost always done in an outpatient setting that does not require an overnight stay.

If you are already experiencing some symptoms, check with your health care provider right away. The earlier the cancer is detected and removed, the better your chances are for becoming cancer free. For early cancer, surgery to remove the cancerous portion of your colon may be all that is needed. In more advanced cases, chemotherapy may also be needed.

March is colon cancer awareness month, make it a point to talk to your health care provider about it!

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