

March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month—PSA for KINS

This is Dr. Mary Meengs, Medical Director of the Humboldt Independent Practice Association, with a Community Comment for KINS. Today I want to talk about colon cancer screening, since March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month.

For both men and women in California, colon and rectum cancer is the 3rd most common cancer, and the 2nd leading cause of cancer death. Humboldt and Del Norte counties have the 6th highest incidence of colorectal cancer in the state, and the 7th highest death rate from it. This cancer will eventually affect 1 in 20 of us.

The survival rate for this common cancer is 66% overall, but it is 94% when it is found early, before it has spread. By the time symptoms appear, like a change in bowel habits or bloody stools, the cancer has often been present and growing for some time. However, there are excellent screening tests which can detect colorectal cancer at a very early, and curable stage. Cancer can even be prevented from developing in the first place if a precancerous polyp is detected and removed during a colonoscopy.

The cause of colon cancer is not known, so everyone should start getting checked for it at age 50. Some people should start screening at a younger age, depending on their family history and other medical conditions. There are several good ways to check for colon cancer. The most well-known is probably the colonoscopy, where a lighted, sterilized, flexible tube is advanced through the length of the colon. Any abnormalities can be removed and biopsied. If the colonoscopy is normal, it doesn't need to be repeated for 10 years. This procedure is covered by insurance, but can be expensive for those without insurance or with a high deductible. Some people don't like doing the required prep, which involves taking laxatives and not eating the day before the test. An alternative test is the flexible sigmoidoscopy, which involves looking at only the lower part of the colon, where most cancers arise. This test should be done every 5 years.

The easiest screening test, from the patient's point of view, is a stool test that is done at home once a year. A small specimen is obtained and turned into the doctor's office, where it is tested for microscopic blood which might indicate a cancer. A positive test requires a follow-up colonoscopy to check for cancer, but if you have a negative test every year for 10 years, that is an equally accurate way to know you don't have colon cancer as having a colonoscopy.

So, there are choices, this is a common disease, and early detection definitely saves lives. Three excellent reasons to discuss colon cancer screening at your next doctor's appointment.

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