

Colon cancer curable and preventable; early detection is key

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Colon cancer is finally on the decline. Why? Because colonoscopy has been used for the last 20 years as an efficient tool to combat this devastating disease. Small polyps or tumors can be removed before they become cancer.

It is estimated that approximately 50,000 people in the United States will die from colon cancer each year. It is the second-leading cause of death from cancer among both men and women. However, it can be prevented.

What causes colon or large intestine cancer? We don't know, but what we do know is that there is definitely a genetic factor associated with this cancer. Risk factors, such as family history of colon cancer or even benign colon polyps, can identify patients who have an increased risk of developing these tumors. Women who have a history of breast, ovarian or uterine cancers are at increased risk as well. Also, the African-American population has seen a dramatic rise in the incidence of this disease.

How can I tell if I might have this disease? Hemoccult testing of the stool for blood is one test that is available, but it does not identify the cause of the bleeding. Further testing will always be required. Additionally, colon cancer and small polyps do not always cause bleeding on a regular basis and, therefore, may be missed. However, colonoscopy is the perfect procedure to diagnose and eliminate early small growths.

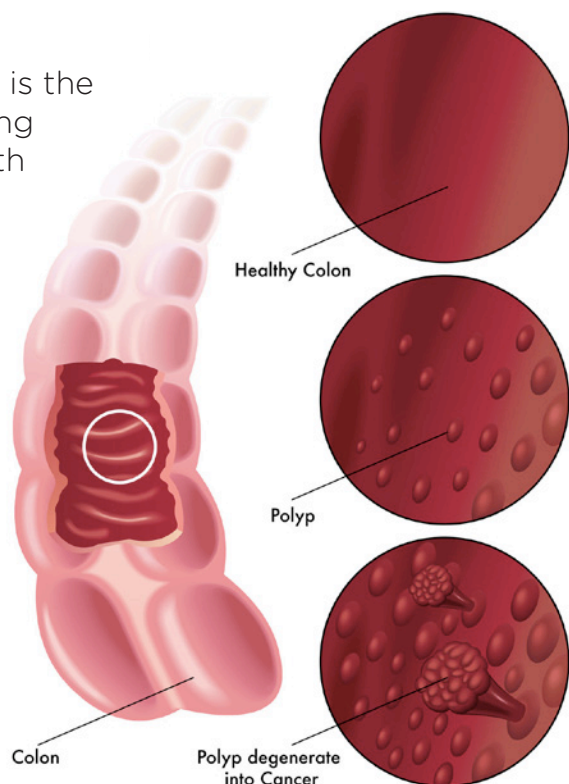
It is a safe and effective tool in the war against cancer of the colon. Patients are sedated and feel no discomfort during the exam. It provides an ideal opportunity for the endoscopist to thoroughly exam the colon and, if necessary, remove these small tumors. These small polyps (tumors) can progress into cancerous masses over a period of 5-10 years. For this reason it is important to undergo colonoscopy examinations at regular intervals.

Screening colonoscopies should begin at age 50 for patients that have no symptoms. However, in patients with family members that have been diagnosed with colon cancer or small benign polyps, the screening should begin at age 40. Any person who has noted a change in their bowel habits or has seen any rectal bleeding should be evaluated immediately regardless of their age. Colon cancer has been diagnosed in patients in their 20s and 30s but is much more common after the age of 50.

Colonoscopy is safe at all ages when performed by an experienced endoscopist. Although the preparation can be rigorous and includes clear liquids and laxatives, it is absolutely necessary for a thorough and detailed examination of the colon.

Colon cancer is preventable with proper screening and curable if diagnosed early. Ask your health care provider about a screening colonoscopy if you are over the age of 50 or if you have noticed any symptoms. March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month. However, being vigilant and watching for signs and symptoms all year, as well as undergoing timely screenings, could save your life.

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