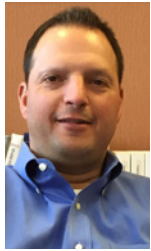


How can colon cancer awareness make a difference in your life?

BY MICHAEL A. VELIUONA, MD



March is dedicated colon cancer awareness month, and health care professionals welcome the opportunity to discuss and review this deadly disease and preventative measures with their patients.

In the United States, approximately 49,700 Americans die annually of colorectal cancer - accounting for approximately 8 percent of all cancer deaths. Although screening rates for colorectal cancer have risen over the last several years, colorectal cancer remains the second leading cause of cancer deaths among men and women in our country. Age is the most important risk factor for colorectal cancer followed by family history.

Most colorectal cancers arise from colon polyps. The progression from polyp to cancer typically takes many years (10 years on average), and this provides a perfect opportunity to intervene and prevent colorectal cancer.

Colonoscopy is the ideal procedure available today for colorectal cancer surveillance and is considered the gold standard. Colonoscopy allows the endoscopist to directly visualize the bowel wall and identify these polyps and remove them before the polyps can progress to colon cancer.

The current recommendation is that all asymptomatic individuals begin colorectal cancer screening at age 50 unless there is a family history of colorectal cancer. In these individuals with a family history, screening may begin as early as age 40. On average, 25% of asymptomatic men and 15% of asymptomatic women will have polyps on screening colonoscopy. Individuals with symptoms such as rectal bleeding or a change in bowel habits should seek medical attention regardless of age as these symptoms may require further evaluation and colonoscopy.

Colonoscopy is a safe and effective procedure when performed by trained experts. The procedure typically takes approximately 20 minutes to complete, and the patient is comfortably sedated for the entire procedure. If the endoscopist identifies

any polyps, then the polyps are removed at the time of colonoscopy.

Colonoscopy does require a full bowel cleanse the evening prior to the procedure, but the bowel preps used today are relatively easy and very well tolerated by the patient. In retrospect, most patients admit that their fears and apprehensions regarding colonoscopy were unwarranted and have no reservations regarding future colonoscopy screenings.

Over the last several years, the medical community has become more vigilant in educating our patients regarding the importance of colorectal cancer screening, and the overall incidence of colorectal cancer in our country is on the decline. Despite this, colorectal cancer screening rates are still well below national targets.

With increased awareness and a collaborative approach between health care professionals and their patients, colonoscopy and colorectal cancer surveillance should become a standard topic of discussion between health care provider and patient. This is essential if we are to continue to effectively combat this deadly but preventable disease.

