

March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month!

When it comes to colorectal cancer, treatments are improving and death rates are decreasing. Yet the ultimate goal for physicians and researchers is prevention. Identifying precancerous changes and taking care of them can stop cancer before it starts.

With about 135,000 Americans being diagnosed with colorectal cancer every year, the disease is the second leading cause of U.S. cancer-related deaths and the third most common cancer affecting both men and women.

Statistics:

- According to the Oklahoma Central Cancer Registry, colorectal cancer is the third most diagnosed cancer among men and women in Oklahoma.
- In Oklahoma, among adults aged 50 years and older, 38.4% reported NEVER having had a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy. Men (41.2%) were more likely than women (35.9%) to report NEVER having had a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy.

The good news is that colorectal cancer can be prevented, and new studies confirm that screening is key to saving lives.

Dr. Brenda Huenergardt, M.D., emphasizes that regular screening is a gateway to preventing this disease. She's referring primarily to colonoscopy, a test in which the physician places a thin, flexible scope into the rectum and guides it through the colon. A tiny camera transmits images of the interior of the colon to a screen. The physician can look for any changes that may warrant further investigation.

"Colonoscopy is the gold standard for colorectal cancer screening," Dr. Huenergardt, M.D. says. A colonoscopy is completed by a physician at a hospital or outpatient center. A thin lighted tube is inserted into the rectum and allows the doctor to view the inner lining of the colon.

"By finding precancerous polyps and removing them, we can actually prevent malignancies from developing," says Dr. Huenergardt, M.D. When diagnosed early, colon cancer is one of the most successfully treated cancers. The five-year survival rate is around 90 percent when caught in early stages.

"Some people are put off by the idea of colonoscopy and the preparation needed. The colon must be cleaned out prior to the test by means of a laxative. But even if this process is slightly unpleasant, the procedure itself is painless, and I believe it's a very small price to pay for potentially saving one's life," Dr. Huenergardt, M.D. says.

Alternatively to a colonoscopy, your physician may perform another common test, a stool test. A stool test is used to look for small amounts of blood or DNA that may indicate a polyp or cancer. These tests are simple and can be performed in the privacy of your home.

While in its earliest stages, colon cancer may exhibit no symptoms, there are some signs that could serve as early warnings, including persistent constipation or diarrhea, rectal bleeding, abdominal discomfort or bloating, loss of appetite, and weight loss.

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, you should contact your primary care doctor for an exam. While the symptoms could be linked to other causes, they could also be early signs of cancer. In short, making a wrong assumption is not worth the risk.

Current guidelines from the American Cancer Society call for a colonoscopy every 10 years starting at age 50, for men and women with average risk. March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, so if you are overdue for a screening, this is a good time to schedule one. As part of our specialty clinic, Dr. Huenergardt, M.D. performs consultations and colonoscopies at Newman Memorial Hospital. To schedule your screening, you can call her office at 580-571-8009.