

Doc Talk

by Chad R. Horrocks, MD Family Practice

In case you missed it, March was National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. It's okay to miss the banner-waving, fundraisers and whatever else goes on in the media to raise awareness, just make sure you don't miss the actual screening.

If you're at least 50 years old, you should schedule your colonoscopy now. Just get it done and you don't have to schedule another one for 10 years unless you have risk factors. Colorectal cancer is the second leading cancer killer in the United States yet about 60% of these deaths could be avoided. As unpleasant as a colonoscopy may seem, it sure beats fighting a growing cancer that could have been prevented.

Frankly, I'm not entirely sure why this procedure has become the butt of so many jokes. Sure, we can share some potty humor and double entendres but let's get to the bottom line: it could save your life, you're under anesthesia during the procedure, and you don't need physical therapy to recover. As an added bonus, many insurance plans and Medicare help cover this screening. (To find out about Medicare coverage, call 1-800-633-4227).

There are several types of screening tests that your physician could recommend including a flexible sigmoidoscopy, stool tests, double contrast barium enema and, of course, a colonoscopy. Other screening tests are also available such as virtual colonoscopy but they have not received official recommendations from the U.S. Prevention Services Task Force. Colonoscopies are still the gold standard for detecting cancerous polyps or growths.

Both men and women are susceptible to colorectal cancer and risk increases with age. Symptoms include blood in your stool, stomach cramps or aches that don't go away, and/or unexplained weight loss. Sometimes there aren't any symptoms, especially in the early stages. If you have a family history of this disease or if you have any concerns, make sure to bring this up with your care provider.

There are several other factors that will increase your risk. Fortunately, we have the power to control some of these risks by preventing obesity, exercising regularly and avoiding cigarettes. I know, I know. Doctors are always nagging their patients to eat healthier, exercise and stop smoking. There are hundreds of very good reasons why doctors keep repeating those words, but it all boils down to one undeniably essential factor: YOU.

Get active about disease prevention by staying up-to-date on your screenings, vaccines and immunizations. Talk to your provider about your health concerns. Visit www.cdc.gov/screenforlife to see preventive measures that may apply to you.

Dr. Horrocks is a family practice physician for Teton Valley Health Care. He serves as Medical Director for the Driggs and Victor Health Clinics.
