

Colonoscopy

It's true: The dreaded test can save your life

By Toni Waldhall

Someone in the United States dies from colorectal cancer every 9.3 minutes.

That statistic from the Journal of the National Cancer Institute is a sad one, considering that colorectal cancer – the most common form of cancer and the second leading cause of death in men and women – is a very preventable disease.

Early detection is the key, according to Craig Philpot, M.D., of Birmingham Gastroenterology Associates at St. Vincent's Birmingham.

"In its earliest stages there are no symptoms," said Dr. Philpot. "But, if caught early, it's totally curable. That's why screening is so important.

Relatively easy to detect and treat, early detection of colorectal polyps brings a 90 percent survival rate.

According to Dr. Philpot, there is a hereditary component to colon cancer, especially if a first-degree relative has been diagnosed with it. But, even without a family history, colon cancer can occur at any age. People over 50 are at the highest risk, and that is why regular screenings should start at that age and occur at regular intervals – at least once a decade.

Screenings can find benign or pre-cancerous polyps, which then can be removed painlessly during the colonoscopy.

Symptoms can include a change in bowel habits (size

or frequency) and blood in your stool. Those who just had their colonoscopy years ago may be pleasantly surprised to hear the preparation has been simplified. Dr. Philpot said the one-gallon fluid mixture patients were formerly required to drink has been halved, with over-the-counter and pill alternatives.

"We can use conscious sedation and general anesthesia for the 20- to 30-minute procedure, so the whole procedure should be painless," said Philpot.

Though high-fat diets are believed to be a contributing factor, there is nothing individuals can do to prevent colon cancer. Philpot said that colon cancer is something that is a part of our western culture.

"High fiber diets and high vegetable intake helps, but the best way to prevent colon cancer is to be aware of the symptoms and to be screened," he said.

Philpot said that is especially true in the African-American population, because of the hereditary factor.

Statistics show that Alabama is an under-screened population.

"That equates for higher colon cancer rates in our state," said Dr. Philpot. "It's not something people like to talk about, but it doesn't have to be that way. Don't be one of those statistics. Schedule a screening for yourself or someone you love."



Dr. Philpot

Some important things to know

Here are the colon cancer survival rates based on staging:

- Stage 1 Colon Cancer: 93%
- Stage 2A Colon Cancer: 85%
- Stage 2B Colon Cancer: 72%
- Stage 3A Colon Cancer: 83%
- Stage 3B Colon Cancer: 64%
- Stage 3C Colon Cancer: 44%
- Stage 4 Colon Cancer: 8%

Scientists are still unsure of exactly what causes colon and colorectal cancer, but some risk factors have been identified, including a high-fat diet, diabetes, smoking, alcohol, ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease and other

inflammatory bowel diseases. Colon cancer indiscriminately affects people regardless of race, sex, economic status or geography. There often are no symptoms.

It is important to get screened if you are:

- 45 and older and African-American.
- 50 or older.
- 40 or older and have a family history of polyps or colon or rectal cancer.
- Have a history of cancer or polyps found earlier.

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