



March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. Colorectal cancer is cancer of the large bowel that results in 655,000 deaths annually, worldwide. It is the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the Western part of the world. Colorectal or colon cancer is a potentially life-threatening illness. But like most cancers, early detection increases your chances of making a full recovery. Simple screening is available and should be done for people over age 50 or who are having symptoms and/or a family history of colorectal cancer.

It is important to know your family medical history to see if you may be at an increased risk for colorectal cancer. If you have a positive family history, screening should begin as soon as reasonable by your primary care provider; don't wait until the recommended age 50.

Self-exam your own stools. If your stool suddenly becomes "black and tarry," this could indicate the presence of hidden blood. However, remember that iron therapy may cause a similar change in your stools. It is wise to get a test that looks for hidden (occult) blood in your stool if you have just started iron therapy. This test allows you to be certain that the changes in your stools are a result of the medication and not a symptom of disease.

During your annual physical exam your primary care clinician should perform a digital rectal exam to check for problems in that area (this should be performed on all men and women). Also, the provider may request that you send three stool samples for blood to the local laboratory. If a stool sample ever comes back positive, it needs to be followed up with more testing and a possible referral for a colonoscopy.

At age 50, both men and women should obtain a colonoscopy to check for any colorectal disease or polyps. If a doctor finds polyps, they can usually be removed during the colonoscopy procedure, thus lessening your risk of developing cancer. It is generally recommended that you get a colonoscopy every 5-10 years or as recommended by your physician. If you are unsure of when you should start getting a regular colonoscopy performed, ask your doctor.

Reducing your intake of red or processed meat may decrease your risk of colon cancer. Processed meats sometimes are made with chemicals that can cause the formation of colon polyps and colon polyps can lead to cancer. It is recommended that you cut back on red and processed meats and start substituting them with meats like chicken or fish. Chicken and fish are processed with very little chemicals and are a healthy part of any nutritious diet.

Increase your intake of dietary fiber. Fiber intake can reduce your risk of colon cancer by decreasing the formation of colon polyps. Foods that contain fiber include: bran

cereals, fruits like kiwi, oranges, and prunes, vegetables, and some yogurts. It is recommended that you consume at least 30 grams of fiber each day to help reduce your risk of colon cancer.

The New York State Cancer Services Program offers screening assistance to individuals who do not have health insurance or who are under-insured. The Cancer Services Program can provide free colorectal cancer screening kits and colonoscopies for eligible individuals. Anyone interested in learning more about colorectal cancer screenings may call the following county health departments for more details:

- **Ontario County Public Health – 585-396-4343**
- **Seneca County Public Health – 315-539-1920**
- **Yates County Public Health – 315-536-5160**

Individuals outside this area may contact the New York State Department of Health toll free number at: 1- 866-442-2262



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