

Mar 16 2010

Colon cancer is the second leading cause of death due to cancer. Approximately 50,000 men and women are diagnosed with colon cancer and more than 150,000 individuals die from colon cancer every year.

Although these are rather grim statistics, the good news is that colon cancer is the only cancer that can be prevented or detected early by having a test called a colonoscopy to identify and remove polyps which have the potential for transitioning to colon cancer. The question that needs to be answered is "When should I have a colonoscopy?"

The National Comprehensive Cancer Network has three categories of risk for developing colon cancer: people with a young family member with colon cancer, people with an older family member with colon cancer, and all others. Unfortunately, no one is without risk in their lifetime.

People who have a family member who was under the age of 50 years old when they were diagnosed with colon cancer are at the highest risk to develop colon cancer. If you are in this category, you should get your first colonoscopy 10 years before the age your relative was diagnosed with colon cancer.

People also at increased risk for colon cancer are those who have a family member who was older than 50 years at the time of their colon cancer diagnosis. People are also at increased risk if they have inflammatory bowel disease or a personal history of endometrial or ovarian cancer. Individuals who are at increased risk for any of these reasons should consult with their health care provider as to when they should have a colonoscopy.

People who are at average risk for colon cancer are older than 50 years of age and have none of the risk factors described above. If you are in this category, your first colonoscopy should be completed at 50 years of age. Follow-up colonoscopy is based on whether polyps are found and of what variety they are. If no polyps are found, another colonoscopy is not needed for 10 years for screening purposes. If polyps of a certain variety called adenoma are found, another colonoscopy would be recommended in three to five years. To reduce your risk of developing colon cancer, discuss having a colonoscopy with your primary care provider at your next appointment.

- Patricia Yetneberk holds a doctorate in nursing practice and works at the Fall City Medical Clinic.