

## *Op-ed Piece*

### **March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month**

Colorectal Cancer - cancer of the colon and rectum - is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States for men and women combined, and over 56,000 people are expected to die from it this year. However, it is a highly preventable and treatable disease if caught early, and an estimated 40,000 lives a year could be saved if men and women would get screened for it.

That is why as a colorectal surgeon I am actively participating in Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month this March and am taking this much-needed opportunity to encourage people to learn how to reduce their risk of the disease and to get screened for it. I am being joined by my colleagues from across the country in this effort, as members of the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons (ASCRS), the leading professional society for colon and rectal surgeons and other surgeons dedicated to advancing and promoting the science and practice of the treatment of patients with diseases and disorders affecting the colon, rectum, and anus.

It has been shown that a low-fat diet, high in vegetables and fruits, coupled with regular exercise can significantly reduce one's risk for developing colorectal cancer. Regular screening of average risk men and women starting at age 50 can help prevent the disease by detecting and removing pre-cancerous polyps, as well as detecting colorectal cancer in the earliest, most curable stages.

Despite the widespread availability of highly effective screening tests, colorectal cancer screening lags far behind screening for other cancers such as breast (mammography), cervical (pap smears) and prostate (digital exams). Many men and women are unaware that once they turn 50, they should be screened yearly. Men and women who have a personal or family history of colorectal cancer or polyps or a personal history of long-term inflammatory bowel disease need to be screened before age 50, as well as women with a personal or family history of ovarian, endometrial or breast cancer.

Colorectal cancer screening costs are covered by Medicare and many commercial health plans. If you are at risk for colorectal cancer, make an appointment today with your health care provider to discuss which of the available procedures is best for you and how often you should be screened.

Colorectal cancer screening is not going to be the high point of anyone's day. But the tests are simple and painless. The five tests your doctor may recommend include:

- **Fecal Occult Blood Test:**  
A simple chemical test that can detect hidden blood in the stool. The test can be taken in the privacy of one's home and sent to your doctor's office or to a laboratory for processing. Recommended testing is every year.

- Flexible Sigmoidoscopy:  
A visual examination of the rectum and lower portion of the colon, performed in a doctor's office. This test may be somewhat uncomfortable, but is not painful. Recommended testing is every 5 years.
- Colonoscopy:  
A visual examination of the rectum and entire colon performed in an endoscopy unit. If polyps are found, they can be removed during this procedure. The exam may be uncomfortable but is not painful. The doctor may give you some medication to make you feel relaxed and sleepy. Recommended testing is every 5-10 years.
- Double-Contrast Barium Enema or Barium X-Ray:  
An X-Ray examination of the rectum and entire colon performed in a radiology unit in a hospital or clinic. Recommended testing is every 5-10 years.

These tests are as simple as they sound. A few moments of discomfort are worth the peace of mind you will have knowing that you have increased markedly the likelihood that you will lead a long and healthy life.

For more information on colorectal cancer and Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, visit the ASCRS Web site at <http://www.fascrs.org/>.

Sincerely,

**YOUR NAME, TITLE AND PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION**