

COLORECTAL CANCER: MYTHS AND REALITIES

Myth:

There is nothing I can do about getting colorectal cancer.

Reality:

Few Americans know that colorectal cancer may be preventable. A low-fat diet, high in vegetables and fruits, and exercise may reduce your risk of developing the disease. Since most colorectal cancer develops from non-cancerous polyps - grape-like growths on the lining of the colon and rectum - screening methods can detect and remove polyps BEFORE they become cancerous.

Myth:

Colorectal cancer is fatal.

Reality:

Colorectal cancer is curable when detected early. Ninety-one percent of patients with localized colorectal cancer (confined to the colon or rectum) are alive five years after diagnosis. But only 37 percent of all colorectal cancers are diagnosed at this stage. The remaining 63 percent of patients come to the doctor when the disease has spread regionally or to distant parts of the body.

Myth:

Screening (testing for a disease even if the patient has no symptoms) is only necessary for individuals who have symptoms.

Reality:

Since early colorectal cancer often has no symptoms, it is important to obtain regular screenings. Screening is checking for cancer in person with no symptoms. Men and women who are 50 or older should get screened regularly for colorectal cancer.

Men and women who are at high risk because they have a personal or family history of colorectal cancer or polyps, or a personal history of inflammatory bowel disease, might need to be screened before age 50. In addition, women who have a personal or family history of ovarian, endometrial or breast cancer may need to be screened before age 50. Talk to your colorectal surgeon or other healthcare professional about when you should begin screening.

About 75 percent of all new cases of colorectal cancer occur in individuals with no known risk factors for the disease, other than being 50 or older.

Myth:

Colorectal cancer strikes only older, white men.

Reality:

Colorectal cancer strikes both women and men. It is estimated that 67,000 new cases of colorectal cancer will be diagnosed in women this year - it is the third leading cause of cancer death among women. And it is estimated that more than

62,000 new cases of colorectal cancer will be diagnosed in men this year. Of the approximately 56,000 people who will die from the disease this year, slightly more than half will be women.

African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to be diagnosed with colorectal cancer in its advanced stages.

Myth:

Colorectal cancer screening is not covered under most health plans.

Reality:

The Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) expanded Medicare coverage in 1998 to include colorectal cancer screenings. Many commercial health plans also cover the cost of screening.