Womenâ€™s Health: The life-saving test women are skipping

by Douglas_W._Laube_MD_MEd

Colon and rectal cancer (colorectal cancer) is the second leading cause of cancer death among men and women in the US. But many women may not be aware of the prevalence of colorectal cancer and assume that it affects primarily men. Not so! An estimated 74,640 women will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 2007 and 26,180 will die from the disease. This is an alarmingly high number of diagnoses and deaths for a cancer that is extremely preventable and treatable. Still, most women are not up to date on screening.

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Some studies suggest that embarrass-ment about the screening procedures and general underestimation of personal risk could be to blame for low colorectal screening rates in women. However, the benefits of these screening exams are undeniable. Routine screening of women over 50 could lead to an estimated 60% reduction in deaths.

Colorectal cancer affects the large intestine and rectum and can take years to develop. It often begins as a tissue growth, called a polyp, in the colon or rectum.

Routine screening helps detect precancerous polyps so that they can be removed before they can turn into cancer. Likewise, the cancer itself can be detected at its earliest stages through regular screeningâ€”when it is 90% treatable. Unfortunately, because of low screening adherence, very few colon cancers are found early.

Colorectal cancer often causes no symptoms at all. As it progresses, symptoms may include a change in bowel habits, bleeding from the rectum, blood in stool, stools that are more narrow than usual, abdominal discomfort (bloating, cramps, or frequent gas pains), loss of appetite, and weakness and fatigue.

ACOG recommends that all women age 50 and older be screened for colorectal cancer. Women may need to be screened before age 50 if they have a first-degree relative younger than 60 (or two or more first-degree relatives of any age) with colorectal cancer or polyps; have had colorectal cancer or polyps themselves; have had bowel disease, such as chronic ulcerative colitis, inflammatory bowel disease, or Crohnâ€™s disease; or have a family history of certain types of colon problems or cancer of the colon.

There are several recommended colorectal cancer screening methods that can be used. Ask your ob-gyn about the different testing options and how often you should be tested

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