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March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month

By Erin Peterson, Communications Director, Colon Cancer Coalition & Jeremy Matloff, MD, CT Gastroenterology Consultants

March is Colorectal Cancer (CRC) Awareness Month. The Colon Cancer Coalition sat down with Dr. Jeremy Matloff to discuss the importance of colon cancer screening.

Why is screening for CRC important?

Colon cancer is the 2nd most common cause of cancer deaths in the U.S. When caught early, it can be treated and cured before becoming life-threatening. In its early stages, there are often no warning signs to suggest cancer is present, which is why screening is so important.

What are options for screening? Are there advantages to one test over another?

A colonoscopy allows visualization of the entire colon and can remove precancerous polyps, thus PREVENTING cancer. This should be offered to everyone. There are also several at-home stool tests (FOBT, FIT, Cologuard) that look for traces

of blood or DNA, which are shed in the presence of cancer, thus DETECTING cancer. These tests can be done in the privacy of the home. Stool tests do not require a bowel prep or anesthesia and are great alternatives for individuals unable to get a colonoscopy. A positive stool test will require a follow-up colonoscopy.

When should screening for CRC begin?

Typically, average risk individuals begin screening at age 50. Recent data shows that colon cancer is more common in younger individuals, and the American Cancer Society now recommends screening begin at age 45. I suspect this will soon be the universal recommendation, so if you are 45, it is time to consider a colonoscopy. Individuals with a family history of colorectal cancer are at higher risk, and should undergo screening at an earlier age, typically 10 years before the age the family member was diagnosed.

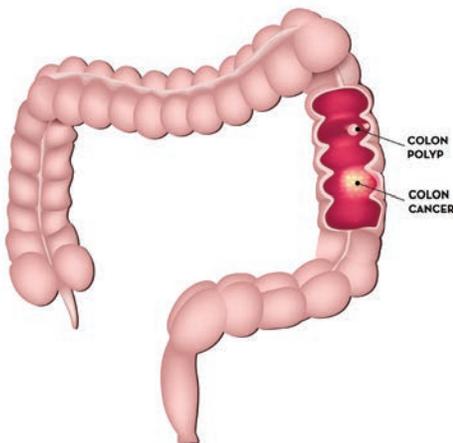
What are the symptoms of CRC?

Colorectal cancer often causes no symptoms in its early stages. Eventually, it can lead to rectal bleeding, abdominal pain, constipation, and anemia (low red blood cell count). In its advanced stages it can lead to an intestinal blockage. Since there are typically no symptoms in its early stages, screening is critical.

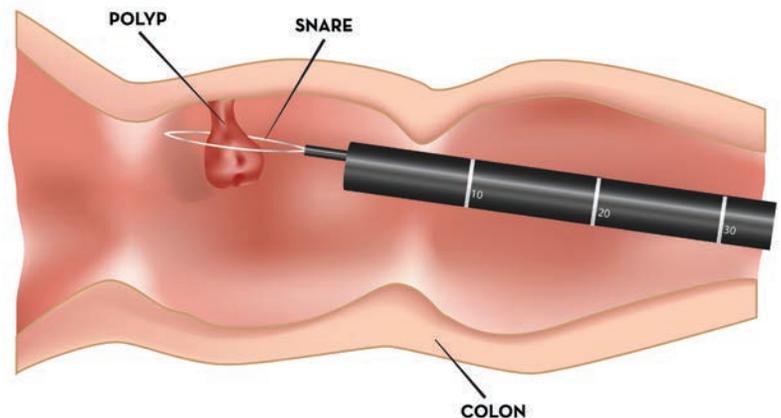
Since there is a rise in CRC in patients under the screening age, what steps should young people with symptoms take?

Colon cancer in young people is particularly devastating. Individuals who are younger than the typical screening age who have any symptoms should see a gastroenterologist for an evaluation. A colonoscopy is very easy and can be lifesaving.

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