

THE NEED FOR COLON CANCER SCREENING

by

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Why are people afraid to be checked for colon cancer? Are they scared to find out that they might actually have cancer? Do they feel the procedure might be embarrassing? Have they heard stories about how bad the bowel prep tastes?

Let us examine this more carefully. Cancer of the colon and rectum is the third most common cause of cancer in the U.S. It is also the third most common cause of death caused by cancer. More importantly, in Lenoir and surrounding counties it is the second most diagnosed cancer. In the past decade the chance of getting colon cancer has decreased, because more people are getting checked or screened for colon cancer by colonoscopy. Screening for colon cancer is usually recommended for persons over the age of 50. The good news is that if colon cancer is caught early enough, the chance of survival is 90% versus 10%, if it has spread to other organs. Another important point is that one can get cancer of the colon and rectum, even if there is no family history of it.

What is a colonoscopy? It is a test that is performed by a Gastroenterologist-a specialist in diseases of the digestive system, in an outpatient setting such as the hospital or in the doctor's office-an office-based endoscopy facility. The privacy of the patient is respected before, during and after the test to make the patient as comfortable as possible, and to relieve any anxiety or fear they might have. The patient receives an anesthetic through a tube or catheter placed in an arm vein to put them in a twilight sleep, so that they are comfortable during the procedure. This is effective about 99% of the time. People who are on nerve pills or sleeping pills, or who are morbidly obese, are more difficult to sedate, and may require other forms of anesthesia such as are given during an operation.

A tube about the size of the finger, called the colonoscope, is inserted into the rectum and is advanced through the length of the colon which is about 5 feet. At that time we can see cancer; polyps which are an overgrowth of the lining of the colon that could lead to cancer; and other abnormalities. Polyps are removed and sent to be analyzed under the

microscope for any potential cancer. Therefore, by removing polyps the risk of cancer is reduced significantly. The procedure usually lasts about 15-30 minutes. Then, the patient is sent to the recovery room for 30 minutes to be watched until they are awake. They can usually eat about an hour after the exam. They will not be able to drive or operate heavy machinery until the next day.

What about that bowel preparation that everyone talks about? There are many laxatives now available to clean out the colon the day before the procedure. The most commonly used ones now are tablets or a half-gallon (2 liter) container, which is a fruit-flavored liquid. So, the taste is not as bad as it used to be, and the quantity is also much less than before.

Therefore, it is my sincere hope that I have explained how important it is to be screened for colon cancer, as it is one of the most preventable and curable cancers, and that I have answered many of the questions you may have had about the procedure.