TuSalud

Fewer Than 1 in 3 Older Latinos Get Screened for Colon Cancer

March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month. According to the American Cancer Society, colorectal cancer is one of the leading causes of cancer-related deaths in the United States. But with simple screening, it is completely preventable. Take action and take care of yourself and your family. Here's how.

March 1, 2012 By Cristina Gonzalez

What is colon cancer?

Colon, or colorectal, cancer is cancer of the largeintestine (colon) or the rectum (the end of the colon). Though other types ofcancer can affect the colon, like lymphoma, it's actually very rare, and theterm colon cancer usually only refers to colon carcinoma. Among Latino men,colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths (andthird among Latino women), and it is one of the most commonly diagnosed cancersin the United States overall.

This year alone it is estimated that more than 143,360people will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer and that an estimated 51,690will die of the disease. But this cancer is one of the few cancers that are completelypreventable. With certain types of noninvasive screening, doctors can removepolyps (small growths the size of grapes that attach to the wall of theintestine) before they become cancerous.

Are there risk factors for colon cancer?

Though there is no one single cause for cancer, there aresome conditions that put you at an increased risk, including lifestyle factors.First, the No. 1 risk factor is age—more than 90 percent of cases occur inpeople 50 or older. Next, you may be at increased risk if you have a familyhistory of either colon or breast cancer or have had cancer elsewhere in thebody. In addition, if you have colorectal polyps or have inflammatory bowel disease, also known as Crohn's, you might be at higher risk. Finally, if youare African American or of eastern European descent you might want to talk toyour doctor about increased screening.

There are some risk factors that you can change. Coloncancer has been associated with a high-fat, low-fiber diet and red meat.However, some studies have found that risk doesn't drop if you switch to ahigh-fiber diet, so no direct link has yet been established. Smoking cigarettesand drinking alcohol are other risk factors for colorectal cancer.

What are the symptoms of colon cancer?
Early stages of colorectal cancer don't usually have anysymptoms. Later on, people may notice some of the following: general abdominalproblems (like bloating or cramps), weight loss, fatigue, vomiting, a change inbowel habits, diarrhea, constipation, stools that are more narrow than usual,bleeding from the rectum or blood in the stool.

Should I be screened for colon cancer?
Yes. If everyone older than 50 were screened regularly, upto 60 percent of deaths could be avoided. But Latinos are resistant toscreening—among those 50 and older, the screening rate for Latinos is only 31.9percent, compared with 49.5 percent for whites. But colon cancer ispreventable.

If you're at average risk for colorectal cancer, you shouldstart getting screened at age 50. A screening involves a colonoscopy duringwhich your doctor will use a thin, flexible tube, called a colonoscope,attached with a small video camera to look at the inner lining of your largeintestine.

If you're at higher risk, you may need to start regularscreening earlier and be screened more often. If you're older than 75, speak toyour doctor about when to be screened. In general, you should get a virtualcolonoscopy, flexible sigmoidoscopy and double-contrast barium enema every fiveyears and a colonoscopy every 10 years.

What is the treatment for colon cancer?
When colon cancer is found early, the first step in treatingit is surgery. A stage 0, colon cancer may be treated by removing cancerouscells, usually at the same time as a colonoscopy. For cancers in stages I, IIand III, more extensive surgery may be needed to remove the part of the colonthat is cancerous. Almost all people with stage III colon cancer receivechemotherapy and radiation after surgery.

Can I prevent colon cancer?
Yes, you can work to lower your risk. The best thing you cando to lower your risk is to be screened early and regularly. You should alsomaintain an overall healthy lifestyle, which includes being physically activefor at least half an hour, five days a week, maintaining a healthy weight, notsmoking, and eating more fruits, veggies and whole grains and less red meat andprocessed meat.

To learn more, click here.

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