

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

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

Are there risk factors for colon cancer?

Though there is no one single cause for cancer, there are some 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 in people 50 or older. Next, you may be at increased risk if you have a family history of either colon or breast cancer or have had cancer elsewhere in the body. 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 you are African American or of eastern European descent you might want to talk to your doctor about increased screening.

There are some risk factors that you can change. Colon cancer 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 a high-fiber diet, so no direct link has yet been established. Smoking cigarettes and 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 any symptoms. Later on, people may notice some of the following: general abdominal problems (like bloating or cramps), weight loss, fatigue, vomiting, a change in bowel 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, up to 60 percent of deaths could be avoided. But Latinos are resistant to screening—among those 50 and older, the screening rate for Latinos is only 31.9 percent, compared with 49.5 percent for whites. But colon cancer is preventable.

If you're at average risk for colorectal cancer, you should start getting screened at age 50. A screening involves a colonoscopy during which 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 large intestine.

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

What is the treatment for colon cancer?

When colon cancer is found early, the first step in treating it is surgery. A stage 0, colon cancer may be treated by removing cancerous cells, usually at the same time as a colonoscopy. For cancers in stages I, II and III, more extensive surgery may be needed to remove the part of the colon that is cancerous. Almost all people with stage III colon cancer receive chemotherapy and radiation after surgery.

Can I prevent colon cancer?

Yes, you can work to lower your risk. The best thing you can do to lower your risk is to be screened early and regularly. You should also maintain an overall healthy lifestyle, which includes being physically active for at least half an hour, five days a week, maintaining a healthy weight, not smoking, and eating more fruits, veggies and whole grains and less red meat and processed meat.

To learn more, [click here](#).