

MARCH IS COLORECTAL CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

SHOULD YOU BE SCREENED?

March is colorectal cancer awareness month. Granted, this is not a fun topic to talk about. But did you know that:

- ◆ Colorectal cancer is a leading cause of cancer death in this country.
- ◆ It can be detected early (often before symptoms appear) with simple screening tests.
- ◆ It's slow growing and can often be successfully treated if diagnosed early.

Colorectal cancer refers to cancer of the colon or rectum, both of which make up the large intestine (or large bowel). This cancer usually starts as small benign polyps. Some polyps become cancerous over a long period of 5 to 15 years. Screening for colorectal cancer can save thousands of lives each year. But many people who should be tested are not. That's why, for the past few years, Aurora Health Care has made a special effort to get the word out and increase testing in people over age 50.

What testing is recommended? Men and women age 50 and older should be screened in one of the following ways:

- ◆ **Colonoscopy** every 10 years. In this procedure, a long flexible tube is used to examine the full length of the colon. This test allows for a close check of the lining of the rectum and the entire colon. If polyps are seen, they can be removed for further testing.
- ◆ **Fecal occult blood test** every year. This is a simple screening test to find unseen blood in the stool, which can be a sign of cancer in the colon or rectal area.
- ◆ **Flexible sigmoidoscopy** every 5 years. In this procedure, a flexible tube is used to detect cancer cells or polyps inside the rectum and lower colon. If any area appears abnormal, a small tissue sample can be taken and sent to the lab for further study.
- ◆ **Both** the fecal occult blood test (every year) and sigmoidoscopy (every 5 years).
- ◆ **Double contrast barium enema** every 5 years. This is a series of X-rays of the colon and rectum. It does not allow removal of any abnormal tissue for testing.

People with a higher risk for colorectal cancer may need to have these tests done earlier and more often. This includes people who have had colorectal cancer or polyps, who have inflammatory bowel disease such as ulcerative colitis, or who have a family history of colorectal cancer.

What else can you do to lower your risk of cancer?

- ◆ Eat a well-balanced, low-fat diet and keep your weight in check.
- ◆ Exercise regularly.
- ◆ Don't smoke.
- ◆ Limit your alcohol intake.
- ◆ Discuss your risk factors with your health care provider, and have regular preventive testing as recommended for you.

If you are age 50 or older, or if you are at higher risk for colorectal cancer, ask your doctor how often you should be tested. Share this information with family members who may need to be tested. It's not something we enjoy talking about—but we can help save lives by spreading the word.

For more information, call the Vince Lombardi Cancer Hotline at 800-252-2990, Parish Nurse Linda Radder at 414-358-4600 ext. 158, or go to www.preventcancer.org.