

March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month

Colon cancer is unique in the medical world. It is one cancer that can actually be prevented if detected early before cancerous polyps have a chance to grow and spread. Colon cancer can strike at any age, but 9 out of 10 new cases are in people age 50 or older.

That is why colorectal cancer screening is recommended for men and women over the age of 50 and for anyone with a family history of the disease, regardless of age.

In Kansas in 2005, 1,733 individuals were diagnosed with colorectal cancer and 1,604 died from the disease. Nationally more than 145,000 new cases of colon cancer were diagnosed in 2005 and 56,290 Americans died. Colorectal cancer is the second leading cancer killer among both men and women, second only to lung cancer.

There is good news nationally- the American Cancer Society (ACS) reports a drop in colon cancer deaths in 2003-2004 due to an increase in screening and early detection. The National Colorectal Cancer Research Alliance, co-founded by national news anchor woman, Katie Couric has promoted colonoscopy tests since 2000 and part of the rise in awareness can be attributed to those efforts. The ads “Are you the picture of health?” featuring Couric are being used extensively on TV, radio and newspapers statewide during March 2008 to raise awareness of colon cancer.

The KCP is recommending that Kansans follow one of the testing guidelines set out by the ACS and the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force to check for colorectal cancer. These tests can include a fecal occult blood test, colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy. Also, be aware of the colorectal cancer facts:

- If you are over age 50, see your doctor to get screened. For those with a family history of the disease screening should begin earlier.

- Colorectal cancer and precancerous polyps don't always cause symptoms.
- Colorectal cancer affects both men and women equally.
- When found early, colorectal cancer treatment can be very effective.
- Many insurance plans help pay for colorectal cancer screening.

Screening tests will depend upon your age, medical history and other factors. A colonoscopy can often detect polyps or small growths in the lining of the rectum and colon, which can be removed before cancer even develops. If cancer is detected while still localized in the bowel, 90 percent of patients can expect to be alive five years later.

Take the time during March to talk to your health care professional about what you need to do to be screened for colon cancer. After all, don't you want to remain "The picture of health?"