

As we say goodbye to the month of March, there is one last (but certainly not the least) wellness observance that needs to be brought to attention. Colorectal cancer is the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths in men and women in the United States. According to the American Cancer Society, approximately 50,310 deaths due to colorectal cancer are expected during 2014. This deadly disease is certainly a serious topic for discussion.

Colorectal cancer normally starts with an abnormal growth of tissue on the inner lining of the colon or rectum. These are called polyps and are non-cancerous in the beginning. Some polyps may never turn into cancer while others will, depending on the type of polyp. Usually, these polyps turn into cancer slowly over several years. When a polyp turns cancerous, it may then spread to other parts of the body and cause damage to other organs as well.

Individuals often wonder what puts them at risk for developing colorectal cancer. Some factors cannot be helped. Factors such as age (those over 50), personal or family history of polyps or colorectal cancer, history of inflammatory bowel disease, having type 2 diabetes and racial/ethnic background (African American) all contribute to one's risk for developing colorectal cancer. There are also lifestyle factors that individuals can control that may contribute to this type of cancer. Diets high in red meats and processed meats, physical inactivity, tobacco use, heavy alcohol use and obesity are all linked to increased colorectal cancer risk.

Luckily, the American Cancer Society reports that there has been a decline in death rates from colorectal cancer in both men and women over the past 20 years. The improvement and number of screenings is likely to have contributed to this decline. Polyps found during screening are often removed before they can turn into cancer. Also, with regular colonoscopies, cancers are more likely to be found early when treatment is more likely to be successful. Treatments and medications have also improved greatly over the past 20 years.

Regular colorectal screening is one of the best defenses against colorectal cancer. Polyps usually take years to develop into cancer. Screenings can detect the polyps and have them removed before they have the chance to develop into cancer. Individuals who have no identified risk factors should begin regular screening at age 50. Those who have a family history or other risk factors should talk to their doctor about getting screened sooner or more frequently.

The importance of being screened regularly cannot be stressed enough as most people who have potentially cancerous polyps don't even know it. Some people with colorectal cancer may experience a change in bowel habits, a feeling that they need to have a bowel movement that is not relieved by doing so, rectal bleeding, dark stools, or blood in the stool, cramping or abdominal pain, weakness, fatigue or unintended weight loss.

If you would like to find out more about colorectal cancer, you can visit the American Cancer Society's website at www.cancer.org. Talk to your doctor about getting screened. With over 96,000 new cases of colon cancer and 40,000 cases of rectal cancer expected this year, this testing is likely to save your life.