

It's Colorectal Cancer Month

By Faye Johnson, R.N.

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What is colorectal cancer? Colorectal cancer (also known as colon cancer) is cancer that occurs in the colon or rectum. The colon is the large intestine or large bowel. The rectum is the passage way connecting the colon to the anus.

Among cancers that affect both men and women, colorectal cancer is the second leading cancer killer in the U.S. But if everyone aged 50 years or older had regular screening tests, at least 60 percent of deaths from this cancer could be avoided.

If you are 50 or older, getting a colorectal cancer screening test could save your life.

Colorectal cancer usually starts from polyps in the colon or rectum. A polyp is a growth that should not be there. Over time, some polyps can turn into cancer. Screening tests can find polyps, so they can be removed before they turn into cancer.

Screening tests also can find colorectal cancer early, when the chance of being cured is good. Colorectal cancer occurs most often in people age 50 or older. The risk increases with age. Both men and women can get colorectal cancer. If you are 50 or older, talk to your doctor about getting screened. It is highly treatable if found and treated early (while it is still small and before it has spread) and has a 90 percent five year survivor rate. If within five years it does not come back, it is considered cured.

Some people have a higher risk for colorectal cancer than others. High risks are:

- You or a close relative have had colorectal polyps or colorectal cancer.
- You have inflammatory bowel disease.
- You have a genetic syndrome such as familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) or hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer.

Speak with your doctor about having earlier or more frequent tests if you think you are at high risk for colorectal cancer.

What are the symptoms of colorectal cancer? People who have polyps or colorectal cancer do not always have symptoms, especially at first.

Someone could have polyps or colorectal cancer and not know it. If there are symptoms they may include: blood in or on your stool (bowel movement); stomach aches, pains, or cramps that do not go away; losing weight for unknown reasons.

If you have any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor. These symptoms may be caused by something other than cancer. However, the only way to know what is causing them is to see your doctor.

The best way to be screened for colorectal cancer is to have a colonoscopy. A colonoscopy is where the doctor puts a long thin, flexible lighted tube into your rectum and entire colon. During

the test, the doctor can find and remove most polyps and some cancers.

According to Dr. Clinton Merrill, an oncologist who sees patients in Grant monthly, "Colonoscopy is certainly the most sensitive and the most cost effective means of screening for colon cancer. During my 30 plus years of practice, and speaking as someone who has personally had three colonoscopies, some of the greatest and most preventable tragedies I have seen occurred in patients whose colon cancer could have been discovered at a curable stage with timely colonoscopy."

There are two physicians here at Perkins County Health Services who perform colonoscopies: Dr. Kristi Kohl at the Grant Medical Clinic (308) 352-7100 and Dr. James Schiefen. If you would like Dr. Schiefen to perform your colonoscopy you will need to get a referral from your regular family physician.