

TAKE THE TEST

New colon cancer screening clinic opens

Q: I heard in the news that Calgary has opened a colon cancer screening centre. My husband and I are both 57 and no one in our family has cancer. Should we be screened for colon cancer?

A: Yes. You and your husband should still be screened for colon cancer. Recently, the University of Calgary in collaboration with the Calgary Health Region, opened the Forzani & MacPhail colon Cancer Screening Centre. This centre will give better access to cancer screening services, including colonoscopy. Colon cancer refers to cancers starting in the large intestine, which includes the colon and the rectum. Colon cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in Alberta. About 1670 people in Alberta will be diagnosed with colon cancer this year and about 610 people will die from it. There is proof that colon cancer screening can lose the number of deaths from colon cancer. Everyone aged 50 to 74 years should be regularly tested to check for colon cancer.

Q: Why is it so important to be screened for colon cancer?

A: Colon cancer often shows no signs it is there until the tumour is quite big. The lower abdomen has lots of room for the tumour to grow. People with colon cancer may not know they have it until the tumour causes bleeding from the rectum or other symptoms. Sometimes the first sign of the cancer is when the tumour blocks the bowel or has spread to other parts of the body. By that time, the cancer usually is not curable. Screening is the only way to find colon cancer at its early stages when treatment would work the best. Colon cancer screening can save your life.

Q: What does the colon do?

A: The colon and rectum are part of the digestive system. The digestive system breaks down food in the stomach and the small intestine so the body can absorb the nutrients the food contains. The waste from the food is all that is left by the time it reaches the colon. The waste is stored as stool in the colon until you have a bowel movement. Then the stool is passed through the anus.

Q: How does colon cancer start?

A: Colon cancer develops on the inner wall of the colon and rectum. Abnormal cells in the wall of the colon start to develop. They form growths called polyps, which can turn into cancer. If the polyps are removed, colon cancer can be prevented. Polyps can be present for years before they develop into colon cancer.

Q: My husband and I are healthy. Are we really at risk for colon cancer?

A: Everyone is at risk for colon cancer and there is no single cause of getting it. Both men and women of any ethnic, racial or age group can get colon cancer. There are, however, some things that seem to increase the risk. About 90 per cent of people who develop the disease are over the age of 50. People with family members (parent, sibling, and child) who have had colon cancer have a greater chance of getting the disease. As well, people who have had polyps or inflammatory bowels disease (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease) are at higher risk for getting colon cancer.

Q: How do we get screened?

A: Talk to your family doctor. If you don't have one, go to a walk-in medical clinic or call Health Link for name of doctors who are taking new patients. In Calgary, the two tests used most often for screening are the fecal occult blood test (FOBT) and colonoscopy. The FOBT is a test to find blood in the stool that you cannot see yourself. A FOBT can be done at home using a test card you get from

the lab. A small sample of stool is smeared onto the test card. The card is taken back to the lab to check for blood. Your family doctor can order this test for you. The FOBT should be done every year.

A colonoscopy is a scope test that is done by a specialist. During a colonoscopy, a thin, flexible tube is inserted into the rectum and colon to allow the doctor to examine the areas. You will be given medication to help you relax or make you sleepy. The FOBT and colonoscopy each have their own advantages and disadvantages. Talk to your doctor to decide which test is best for you.

Q: What if one of us gets a positive result?

A: A positive FOBT result means there was a blood found in the stool. This does not mean you have cancer. If the test is positive, more testing is needed to find out why. A positive FOBT may be due to pre-cancerous polyps, cancer, certain diets, or other conditions such as hemorrhoids. The recommended follow-up test for a positive FOBT is colonoscopy. If a polyp is found during the colonoscopy, the doctor will remove it to prevent it from developing into cancer. The success rate of treating colorectal cancer found at an early stage is over 90 per cent.

Q: What can we do to reduce the chance of getting colon cancer?

A: Getting screened for colon cancer is the most important thing to do. Only 15 per cent of Albertans aged 50 to 74 are being screened at this time. Next, make sure to live a healthy lifestyle. Exercise regularly and maintain a healthy body weight. Drink alcohol in moderation and do not use tobacco. Increase dietary fibre and reduce intake of refined sugars and animal fats. Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit. Even if you are healthy and live well, it is still very important to be screened.

By Isabel Clark, a Clinical Development Co-ordinator with Calgary Health Link, Apple Magazine 2008.

For more information, please visit:

Forzani & MacPhail Colon Cancer Screening Centre: www.colonscreeningcentre.com

To speak to a health professional, contact your family doctor or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling: Calgary Health Link at 403-943-LINK(5465) or toll free at 1-866-408-LINK(5465). Mandarin Health Link 403-943-1554, Cantonese Health Link 403-943-1556.