

Colon Cancer is preventable if caught early

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SALT LAKE CITY — Less than half of people who are eligible for colon cancer screening actually undergo the procedure, though a local specialist who performs colonoscopies says it has become almost as routine as a visit to the dentist.

Because 90 to 95 percent of colon cancers are preventable if caught early, it seems odd at first blush that more people aren't screened. But Dr. Edward J. Frech says patients often "have lots of misconceptions about the reasons for screening" and don't understand who is eligible.



Dr. Edward J. Frech

Frech and his colleague, Dr. Michael J. Sossenheimer, of Mountain West Gastroenterology and Intermountain Medical Center, hope to answer those questions for callers on Saturday during the monthly Deseret News/Intermountain Healthcare Hotline. The free call-in program runs from 10 a.m. to noon, and callers will speak with one of the doctors privately. From the Salt Lake area, call 236-6061. Elsewhere, the toll-free number is 1-800-925-8177.

"Most of the people we see don't have any symptoms," Frech said, underscoring the reason that colon cancer is the second most common cause of cancer death in U.S. The vast majority of people don't have symptoms until it has progressed to late-stage disease. At that point, they're looking for a surgeon, he said. Story continues below

"There's nothing more horrifying to me that someone who comes in anemic, fearful of a colonoscopy, finally goes in to see the doctor and we find they now have cancer," Frech said.

"I think most hesitation is fear of the unknown. People are fearful about being put to sleep and about the risk of (bowel) perforation. The reality is those are largely unwarranted fears. I can think of a total of one patient in the last two years that actually had a problem with (anesthesia), and I've never seen a perforation.

Frech said he has found that, "if we're given an opportunity to help people better understand what we do, almost invariably it gives them what they need to do the right thing."

While general guidelines suggest a colonoscopy every 10 years beginning at age 50, for those who are at higher risk because a first-degree relative has colon cancer, the screening can begin much earlier, he said.

Though no definitive cause for colon cancer is known, family history plays a large role, and environmental factors may have some impact yet to be understood.

When people do undergo screening, Frech said about 30 percent of men and 25 percent of women over 50 have polyps.

Though some may be benign, doctors will always remove a polyp because "frankly it's hard to diagnose whether it's pre-cancerous or not with the scope" that is fed through the colon so specialists can see inside. Rather than take a chance, "we'll remove all polyps" and send them out for testing to see whether they are pre-cancerous.

Cancer prevention is most effective when polyps are removed in their early stages. "As they grow larger, it's more difficult to tell if they've been completely removed," Frech said.

For the very rare patient whose anatomy won't allow for the scope to examine the entire colon, doctors will use a virtual CT colonography scan as a secondary testing method, he said. "The best test is the test that gets done," he said, noting an ongoing debate among some in the medical community about whether colonoscopy or virtual CT colonography is best for patients. "We're all on the same team and trying to eliminate colon cancer. We just want people to get tested."

Call free hotline Saturday

Colon cancer screening, symptoms and treatment are the topic of Saturday's Deseret News/Intermountain Healthcare Hotline. From 10 a.m. to noon, Dr. Edward Frech and Dr. Michael Sossenheimer, of Mountain West Gastroenterology and Intermountain Medical Center, will answer questions from callers. From the Salt Lake area, call 236-6061. Elsewhere, the toll-free number is 1-800-925-8177, only operational during hotline hours.

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