



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Health Department: Get Screened for Colorectal Cancer

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BRATTLEBORO – Jeffrey Potash, MD, a gastroenterologist at Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, gives his patients a choice about how to get tested for colorectal cancer. While he does not insist on colonoscopy he list all the compelling reasons why it is better than every other method of testing.

“A colonoscopy is the most accurate, most comfortable, most complete test, and if we detect a polyp in a cancerous or precancerous stage we can remove it and prevent cancer that same day,” Dr. Potash said. “I removed three cancerous polyps last week, and the number of people who get cancer once a polyp is removed is virtually none.”

March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. Screening is recommended for everyone (age 50 to 75). If detected, precancerous polyps (abnormal growths) can be removed before they turn into cancer.

Ninety percent of men and women whose colorectal cancer is diagnosed at a localized stage survive their cancer for five or more years, compared to 12 percent of those diagnosed with late stage colorectal cancer. Fewer than half of Vermonters with colorectal cancer had their cancer detected at an early stage.

Some people are at a higher risk than others for developing colorectal cancer, including those with inflammatory bowel disease, a personal or family history of colorectal polyps or colorectal cancer, or people with certain genetic syndromes.

Sharon Mallory, comprehensive cancer control coordinator for the Health Department, had her first colonoscopy at age 38 (12 years earlier than most people) because her mother was diagnosed with colon cancer at age 47.

“An early diagnosis saved my mother’s life,” Mallory said. “She was lucky. She took action and got screened, and I followed the advice of my physician and went in to be screened early as well. I will now be getting screened every five years because I am at higher risk.”

As of 2010, nearly one in three adults between the ages of 50 and 75 are not up to date with recommended colorectal cancer screening. If everyone over the age of 50 were screened regularly, as many as 60 percent of deaths from colorectal cancer could be avoided, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in Vermont, second only to lung cancer. According to Health Department data, 71 percent of Vermonters have met screening guidelines for colorectal cancer.

Everyone age 50 to 75 should get any one of the following colorectal cancer screening tests:

- A fecal occult blood test (FOBT), done at home - every year.
- A flexible sigmoidoscopy done by a health care provider - every five years (accompanied by FOBT every three years).
- A colonoscopy done by a health care provider - every 10 years.

Although a colonoscopy is the most comprehensive test, “doing something is far better than doing nothing,” Dr. Potash said. “The best test is always the one that gets done instead of not at all.”

Vermonters should talk with their medical providers to understand their risk for colorectal cancer, determine the tests they should receive, and whether they need to start testing at age 50 or earlier.

For more information about colorectal cancer visit healthvermont.gov.

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