

A Simple Test That Could Save Your Life: Why Colonoscopy Matters

After having her fourth child, a thirty year old woman was having issues with constipation and hemorrhoids. She assumed the bleeding she had with her bowel movements were due to her hemorrhoids. Her doctor suggested she undergo a colonoscopy just to be safe. During her procedure, two pre-cancerous growths were found and removed. It is likely that they wouldn't have been found, and may have progressed into cancer without a colonoscopy. The procedure saved her life. Stories like this are common. While I was working with a local physician at the Samaritan Medical Academic Residency Training clinic through SUNY Upstate's Rural Medical Education Program, four patients in a single day were found to have positive stool sample screening results. Each of them now faces a period of uncertainty. Was the test result a sign of something serious, or just a false alarm? The only way to know for sure is through a colonoscopy.

Colon cancer is often called a "silent disease" because it can grow for years without symptoms. By the time signs like bleeding, fatigue, or weight loss appear, the cancer is often in a later stage. Colonoscopy is the most effective way to definitively detect and prevent colon cancer. Colorectal cancer is one of the most preventable cancers, yet Jefferson and Lewis counties have higher rates of both new cases and deaths than the New York State average. Several factors contribute to this issue: lower screening rates, higher rates of smoking and obesity, and diets that are often high in red or processed meats and lower in fiber, fruits, and vegetables. In our community, where people work hard and put off their own health needs, these risk factors add up. That means more of our friends, family members, and neighbors are being diagnosed later, when treatment is more difficult and survival rates are lower. Early detection through screening can make all the difference, often turning what could be a deadly disease into one that is preventable and treatable.

There are several ways to screen for colon cancer. The fecal occult blood test (FOBT), or fecal immunochemical test (FIT), looks for tiny amounts of blood in the stool—something you can't see yourself. These tests include Cologuard, OC-FIT, and the Hemoccult tests. These tests are simple and can be done at home, but a positive result doesn't always mean cancer; it could be from hemorrhoids, diet, or other causes. A positive result must always be followed up with a colonoscopy. Only colonoscopy allows doctors to see the entire colon and also remove polyps, small growths that can turn into cancer over time, during the procedure. That's why colonoscopy is considered the most thorough and effective screening test. It doesn't just find cancer early, it can prevent it altogether. Yet, too few people in our counties undergo this procedure. Fear, lack of time, and worries about discomfort are common reasons for delays. Modern colonoscopies are safe, quick, and usually done under sedation so patients don't feel anything, or remember the procedure. The preparation for the "clean-out" the day before has improved over the years, with better-tasting solutions and shorter periods of fasting before the procedure. The peace of mind afterward is worth every bit of effort.

If you're 45 or older, you should talk with your healthcare provider about getting screened and even sooner if you have a family history of colon cancer or other risk factors such as rectal bleeding, changes in your bowel habits, or persistent abdominal pain. Screening is covered by most insurance plans including Medicaid and Medicare, and local hospitals and clinics in Jefferson and Lewis counties offer affordable options for those without coverage.

Our community is filled with hardworking people who care deeply for their families and neighbors. Taking the time to schedule a colonoscopy is one of the best ways to stay healthy and keep being there for the people who depend on you. Colon cancer doesn't have to be a silent killer, it's one of the few cancers we can stop before it starts. Let's make sure we do.