

Colonoscopy

THE INSIDE STORY

by JULIA BAILEY

Thanks to the “Katie Couric effect” — an actual phenomenon cited in *JAMA* — most of us are aware that we need to get a colonoscopy to screen for colon cancer beginning at age 50 (or sooner, if you have a family history).

What many people don’t realize is just how unique colon cancer is. “It’s a cancer that you can actually stop before it starts by detecting and removing precancerous polyps early by getting a colonoscopy,” said Jasmine Greenamyre, acting CEO of the Colon Cancer Alliance, the largest and oldest patient advocacy organization dedicated to colorectal cancer.

Consider this: Colorectal cancer, one of the most critical cancers encountered in the U.S., was responsible for the deaths of more than 50,000 people in 2012 — most of which could have been prevented with screening, early detection and treatment. The lifetime risk of developing colon cancer is about one in 20, according to the American Cancer Society, and more than 90 percent occur after the age of 50. And that’s why testing should begin at that age.

Polyps, or small growths, can

begin to develop on the inner surface of the colon or rectum as we get older. “One-third of the population makes polyps, but there are no symptoms,” said Dr. Kavita Singh, a gastroenterologist at Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago. “You can have a large polyp in early or advanced stage cancer and never feel it.” The colonoscopy procedure makes it possible for your doctor to find and remove precancerous and cancerous polyps in the colon before they can turn into cancer.

For a successful colonoscopy, it’s important to be thorough in cleaning out your bowel. You’ll need to refrain from eating solid food the day before the procedure and drink a laxative solution that cleanses waste from the colon. While patients report that the preparation is often worse than the procedure itself — humorist Dave Barry has described the taste as a

“mixture of goat spit and urinal cleanser, with just a hint of lemon” — doing a complete bowel prep is key for your doctor to do a thorough examination of your colon.

“I can’t emphasize too strongly how important it is to be thorough with the preparation,” Greenamyre said. “You don’t want to take a chance on having to reschedule your exam because you didn’t do a complete cleanse. And, really, over the years, the preparation has come a long way. It’s not as bad as it used to be.”

Most patients are sedated for the colonoscopy procedure, which usually takes about 30 to 45 minutes. Your doctor uses an endoscope, or small camera, to view the inside of your colon to spot and remove any polyps. Recovery is monitored for about an hour before discharge.

According to StopColonCancerNow.com, screening colonoscopies will now be fully covered by Medicare and many private insurers, thanks to the Affordable Care Act. Even if you’re concerned about discomfort before the procedure, this life-saving procedure is worth the time and trouble. “It’s the most comprehensive test for colorectal cancer there is,” she said. “So, no excuses, let’s get it done, because this is a cancer we can actually prevent.” ●