

National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month - Top Takeaways

March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. Since its inception in the year 2000, Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month has become an opportunity for patients, survivors, caregivers and advocates to rally around the cause, providing awareness and education.

Excluding skin cancers, colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer diagnosed in both men and women in the country. The American Cancer Society (ACS) estimates more than [151,000 new cases](#) of colorectal cancer will be diagnosed this year.

According to Dr. Omar Khokhar, an OSF HealthCare gastroenterologist in Bloomington, Illinois, shining a spotlight on colorectal cancer, its prevalence, and the importance of screenings can truly save lives.

“It's important to really dedicate resources during the calendar year to really emphasize how important it is, because the screening in this particular situation works because, A – it reduces patient morbidity, and B – it reduces the burden on the health care system downstream,” he says.

Something new to consider this year - the recommended age to start colorectal cancer screening has been lowered from age 50 to 45.

This is in direct relation to a concerning trend. Since 1994, colon and rectal cancers have increased 51% among adults under the age of 50. This data from the ACS reflects what Dr. Khokhar and his colleagues see in practice.

“There was data that came out recently showing that the most rampant increase was in ages 20 through 39,” Dr. Khokhar explains. “So when we looked at the preponderance of all that data, all the societies do their review, and we now have the recommend to reduce the age from 50 to now 45 for colon cancer screening.”

Opinions vary on the reasons people are being diagnosed at a younger age. Some experts believe that diet, too much red meat, and obesity are to blame, as many of these patients do not have a family history of colon cancer, which is traditionally a main risk factor.

Dr. Khokhar says committing to a healthy lifestyle could greatly reduce risk unrelated to your family tree.

“What's good for your heart is good for your colon. So I would emphasize moderation with red meat, more fruits, more vegetables - a healthier lifestyle. Just overall global improvement in your health should help with your individual risk of getting colon cancer,” Dr. Khokhar says.

The gold standard in colorectal cancer screening is a colonoscopy. Colonoscopies allow physicians to view the entire colon and both detect and remove polyps, small clumps of cells that can develop into cancer, during the same procedure.

Lower risk patients, however, may also be eligible for one of several other non-invasive tests, including at-home stool tests available by a physician order. These tests, including Cologuard, can be done outside of a physician's office and can detect blood in the stool or abnormal DNA that may suggest cancer.

“If you're average risk and you're 45 to say 50, you may qualify for a stool sample, and those are commonly referred to as an iFOB test, or Cologuard. And those detect blood in your stool and abnormal DNA in your stool,” Dr. Khokhar says. “If those are positive, that needs to be followed up with a colonoscopy. If it's negative you're screened, but you just need to do them more often than a colonoscopy.”

The main takeaway, says Dr. Khokhar, is to have an open and honest conversation with your physician, even before you hit the benchmark of the recommended screening age.

“I think it's important to have a medical home by the time you're 40, and then that way your doctor can also be on you to make sure you're getting all the screenings, not just colon cancer screening, but breast cancer screening, lipid screening, all those kinds of things, to make sure that you're not just reactive but proactive in your health.”

Colorectal polyps and colorectal cancer don't always cause symptoms, especially at first. That is why getting screened regularly for colorectal cancer is so important.

If you do experience symptoms, they may include a change in bowel habits, blood in or on your stool (bowel movement), abdominal pain, aches, or cramps that don't go away or unexplained weight loss. If you have any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor.