

Colorectal Cancer Awareness

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. In the United States, and in Licking County, colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths that affects both men and women. This type of cancer includes cancer of the colon and rectum.

Each year in Licking County, an average of 80 residents are diagnosed with colorectal cancer, with over half of those cases being diagnosed in the late stage, and 30 of those people will die due to colorectal cancer. The good news is that many of those deaths can be avoided by screening and early detection.

Screening tests can help prevent colorectal cancer from developing by finding precancerous polyps (abnormal growths) so that they can be removed before they have a chance to develop into cancer. Screening also can find this cancer early, when treatment is most effective. However, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that about one-third of adults aged 50 or older (about 22 million people)—the age group at greatest risk of developing colorectal cancer—have not been screened as recommended.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends that adults aged 50 to 75 be screened for colorectal cancer with colonoscopies recommended every 10 years for people 50 years and older. The decision to be screened after age 75 should be made on an individual basis. There are several different screening tests available that can help identify polyps or colorectal cancer. There is no single best test for any person. Each test has advantages and disadvantages, some use simple take home screening kits, others require an outpatient medical procedure. Talk to your doctor about which tests are recommended for you, and how often you should be screened.

One of the biggest reasons why people don't get screened is concerns over the cost, but thanks to the Affordable Care Act, screening is covered with no deductible in most health plans. The other most common reason for anxiety is the preparation required for a colonoscopy. Part of the prep is taking laxatives to clean out the colon prior to the test. I've had two colonoscopies, and while the prep is no fun, it is a minor sacrifice to prevent cancer from forming or to avoid a late stage cancer diagnosis that may occur if I waited for symptoms to show up.

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cancer killer that affects both men and women — but it doesn't have to be. If you are 50 years or older, get screened now. If you think you may be at increased risk for colorectal cancer, talk to your doctor about when to begin screening. Ask which test is right for you, and how often to get tested.

Ebel is Licking County Health Commissioner.

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