



Sue Ann Says: Lets Dispel the Myths about Colorectal Cancer

News anchor Katie Couric famously made the case: the minor inconvenience of a colonoscopy sure beats the profound trauma of developing colorectal cancer, enduring months or years of treatment, and perhaps, like Katie's husband, losing your life to a disease that is usually preventable.

Like most women, I assumed that since I don't have a family history, I didn't have to worry about colorectal cancer. I had no clue about my other risk factors (having had breast cancer is one). But when I learned that this is the third most common – and most deadly – cancer among Wisconsin women, this teacher did her homework.

One great source of information was Noelle LoConte, MD, assistant professor in Medical Oncology at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

A preventable cancer

Cancer in the colon or rectum usually begins with tissue abnormalities such as polyps. Although most never turn cancerous, some do. But from the time abnormal cells begin to grow, it can be a decade or more before cancer develops. *This means we can actually prevent most colorectal cancers*, Dr. LoConte emphasized. Through routine screening tests, doctors can find and remove these non-cancerous polyps before they become cancerous. If cancer has developed, routine screening can detect them early, when they are most treatable.

Dr. LoConte said that more than 90 percent of colorectal cancers are curable if caught in the earliest stage. But the majority of these cancers aren't found until later. Why?

“Routine colorectal screening saves lives. The tragedy is that most women ignore routine screening because they don't realize they are at risk,” Dr. LoConte told me. Colorectal cancer typically doesn't cause symptoms until it is already well advanced. Symptoms often are attributed to other causes, further delaying diagnosis.

Symptoms can include:

- A change in bowel habits for more than several days (diarrhea, constipation, narrowing of the stool, feeling of fullness)
- Blood in the stool
- Cramping or steady abdominal pain
- Unexplained weakness and/or fatigue

Know your risk factors

The first step in prevention is to know your risk factors. A family history of colorectal cancer puts you at higher risk. But most colorectal cancers occur in people with no family history. Other risk factors include:

- Being over age 50. Colorectal cancer is the #1 cancer in women over age 70. But people younger than 50 get the disease too.
- Personal and/or family history of non-cancerous polyps
- Personal history of Crohn's, ulcerative colitis or other inflammatory bowel disease
- Diabetes
- Smoking
- Heavy alcohol intake
- Being African American or a Jew of Eastern European descent
- A diet high in fats and red meats, low in fruits and vegetables
- Physical inactivity and obesity

Don't avoid routine screening exams

Regular screening based on your specific risks is the best defense. Tests include a routine physical exam and digital rectal exam. Your doctor might suggest an occasional fecal occult blood test or sigmoidoscopy.

Depending on your age and risk factors, a colonoscopy may be recommended. A thin, flexible instrument is inserted into the colon to check for abnormalities. Polyps usually can be removed in the same procedure and the tissue is biopsied to rule out cancer.

I'm here to tell you that people who say how scary colonoscopies are have never had one themselves. I promise: it's only the anticipation that's painful. Sure, a colonoscopy takes a few hours out of your day. Well, and the day before, when you'll need to clear out your system in preparation for the exam. But a little inconvenience and a bit of your time has a great payback: your life.

Still squeamish? Take heart. New screening options are being developed. One is being pioneered in Madison: a non-invasive "virtual colonoscopy" CT scan. You'll still have to put in the prep work the day before and if the CT scan finds abnormalities, you'll probably require a full colonoscopy.

"When women understand that colorectal cancer is almost always preventable and that we are all at risk, I hope they are as vigilant about routine colonoscopies as they are about pap smears," Dr. LoConte told me. Amen to that. Don't let misconceptions about colorectal cancer impair your health. Research your risk factors. Talk with your doctor. Lead a healthy lifestyle, with plenty of exercise and good nutrition. Follow up with all recommended screening exams. And stop putting off the colonoscopy! Do it for yourself ... and for those who love you. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

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