

March is colon cancer awareness month

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Last summer I turned 50. Like many of people who have reached that advanced age, the last thing I wanted to do was get a colonoscopy or deal with recommended health screening of any kind.

A colonoscopy is a procedure to look inside the colon and rectum for polyps, abnormal areas or cancer. It is recommended for anyone age 50 or older, those with a close relative who have had colorectal polyps or colon cancer, or those with a history of polyps or inflammatory bowel disease.

Despite being a founding member of the Nevada Colon Cancer Partnership and the fact the procedure is a covered benefit in my health insurance plan, I found other ways to celebrate my birthday.

In most cases, colorectal cancer develops from precancerous polyps or abnormal growths in the colon or rectum. There are an estimated 1,240 new cases of colon cancer in Nevada or 46.9 new cases per 100,000 population in Nevada. Our rate of new colon cancer cases is slightly below the national rate of 47.9 and our rank among US states is 34th.

However, each year an estimated 500 Nevadans die of colon cancer. That figure translates to a colon cancer death rate of 18.9 deaths for every 100,000 Nevada residents – the 13th highest colon cancer mortality rate among US states and well above the national rate of 16.3 deaths per 100,000 population.

Many, if not most of those deaths, could have been prevented with screening colonoscopy.

Despite the clear value of colon cancer screening – the vast majority of cancers detected at an early stage can be cured – only slightly more than half of adult Nevadans at risk for colon cancer have been screened. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 55.7 percent of Nevadans over the age of 50 have been screened for colon cancer – a screening rate well below the national rate of 62.2 percent.

There are many reasons why people are not screened for colon cancer, including poor health insurance coverage and the lack of a regular source of primary medical care.

I my case, the uncertainty of the procedure and the “yuck factor” account for most of my procrastination – we are, after all, talking about an invasive diagnostic procedure in one of the more delicate regions of the body.

Since my last birthday I’ve learned a great deal about colon cancer and have scheduled my first colonoscopy in the spirit of colon cancer awareness month.

For your own health or that of someone you love, I encourage everyone to take a moment and learn a little more about this lethal, but largely preventable, disease by visiting the Nevada Colon Cancer Partnership at www.nvccp.org.

At the end of the day, colon cancer is a preventable, treatable, and beatable disease, but only with proper screening.

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