

Colon cancer is beatable if caught early, get screened

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Historically, Nevada has lagged behind most US states in the percentage of adults aged 50 and over receiving recommended screening for colon cancer. Poor screening rates have resulted in higher-than-average levels of new colon cancer cases and associated treatment costs, not to mention higher rates of preventable colon cancer mortality in Nevada for decades.

Colon cancer is the fourth most commonly reported cancer in Nevada and is responsible for nearly ten percent of all new cancer cases. According to the Nevada Central Cancer Registry, there are an estimated 1,079 newly diagnosed cases of colon cancer and 432 colon-cancer deaths in Nevada each year. Moreover, each new case of colon cancer is difficult and expensive to treat – in 2012, the estimated billed charges for hospital care received by Nevadans being treated for colon cancer topped \$50 million.

Despite the clear value of colon cancer screening – the vast majority of cancers detected at an early stage can be cured and an estimated nine of ten individuals whose colon cancer is caught early and treated are still alive five years later – over 40 percent of adult Nevadans at risk for colon cancer have not been screened. Evidence-based screening options include having had a fecal occult blood test in the past year, a sigmoidoscopy with the past five years, or a colonoscopy within the previous ten years.

The good news is that we have recently made important strides in reversing our state's low screening rates. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Nevada's colon cancer screening rate increased from 50 to 58 percent in less than a decade. While this figure is well below the national Healthy People goal of 70.5 percent by 2020, the concerted outreach efforts of the Nevada Colon Cancer Partnership and collaborating providers to increase awareness about colon cancer are beginning to be reflected in improved screening rates and the early diagnosis of treatable disease.

The most striking improvement in colon cancer screening rates has taken place in Washoe County, where rates have increased from 52 to 65 percent over the past six years and are now on par with national rates of adults who are up to date with colon cancer screening.

Statewide efforts to improve screening rates have been bolstered by provisions contained in the Affordable Care Act requiring all new health plans, Medicaid, and Medicare to provide recommended colon cancer screening at no cost to patients.

The reduction of financial barriers to screening options and greater awareness about colon cancer has Nevada moving in the right direction on this major killer. At the end of the day, though, colon cancer is a preventable and beatable disease, but only with proper screening.

Additional information on colon cancer screening and the efforts of the Nevada Colon Cancer Partnership can be found at www.nvccp.org.

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