Options for colorectal cancer screening

Colorectal cancer occurs when abnormal cells grow in the lining of the large intestine (colon) or rectum. Although it is the second highest cause of cancer death in the U.S., when found early, colorectal cancer is highly curable.

Testing for trouble before there are symptoms (screening) is highly recommended for African Americans over 45 years old and other adults over 50.

Colonoscopy is generally considered the gold standard for colon cancer screenings. A tiny tube is inserted into the rectum. A tiny video camera at the tip of the tube lets the doctor see inside the entire colon. Abnormal tissue and polyps can be removed during the test. The exam takes 30 to 60 minutes. Advance preparation, sedation and after-care are required.

Other techniques are valuable but are not as thorough as a colonoscopy: CT colonography is an X-ray that detects larger but not smaller polyps and takes only about 10 minutes. Flexible sigmoidoscopy is similar to a colonoscopy but does not allow the doctor to see the entire colon, usually does not need sedation and takes 15 to 20 minutes. Fecal occult blood test lets you collect a stool sample at home and doesn’t require emptying the colon before the test.

Talk with your health care provider about which screening option is best for you. The important thing is to test for colorectal cancer!

Prayer: Dear God, let me be mindful of my responsibility in maintaining my good health. Help me be diligent in working with my doctors to identify potential threats to my well-being. Amen.

Resources: Advocatehealth.com • cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/detection/colorectal-screening • Cancer.org/Cancer/ColonandRectumCancer • uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org (a group of experts convened by the U.S. Public Health Service) • patients.gi.org/topics/colorectal-cancer • cdc.gov/cancer/colorectal/basic_info/screening/

Practical Guide to the Health Care System: How to choose a doctor

Last year, 1 in 8 Americans changed primary care doctors. Others have never selected one and rely on emergency rooms or urgent care clinics for medical needs. Having a doctor is important, and successfully choosing one takes time.

Asking suggestions from people you trust and respect is a good start, but ultimately it is you who must decide which doctor best suits your needs, situation and even personality.

Insurance is an important consideration. Find out if your insurance plan restricts your choices or offers incentives to use plan-affiliated doctors. If you are uninsured, you may be able to negotiate with a doctor about a reduced fee.

Your personal requirements and preferences need to be looked at carefully. Everyone needs a primary care doctor who can then recommend specialists as needed. When selecting a primary care doctor, you may want to consider the hospitals at which your doctor has admitting privileges. Write down what you need and want in order of importance to you.

Research those you are considering. Illinois has 4,600 licensed physicians and surgeons, and it’s easy to check online to make sure a physician’s license is valid and that he/she is board certified (resources below). In addition, some health plans offer networks of “honor roll” doctors, and you can call 1-800-3-ADVOCATE for assistance in selecting a physician who has admitting privileges at Advocate hospitals.

Your doctor needs to be a good match for you, and your relationship is one of the most important you’ll ever have. Finding a doctor is best done when you have time to make the best decision. Perhaps that time is now.


Coming in April: How to navigate a hospital