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Colon Cancer Screening at 45: Why Younger Adults Should Take Notice

March is colon cancer awareness month. According to the American College of Gastroenterology, colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer in both men and women. It is one of the most preventable types of cancer. Cancer rates have been increasing for those born around 1990 or after; this change reflects a troubling trend of increased cancer cases in younger people.

Screening guidelines now recommend that people begin screening for this type of cancer at age 45. However, despite the growing concern for increased colon cancer in younger people and the recommendation to screen earlier, only about 20% of those who are at average risk are being screened. Experts are unsure which factors could be contributing to the increase in colon cancer cases among young people. However, there are risk factors to consider. Risk factors include obesity, physical inactivity, smoking, unhealthy diets, excessive alcohol consumption, a family history, and inherited genetic conditions.

As stated above, earlier screening is a change from the previous starting screening age of 50. Screening options include:

- **Colonoscopy:** a one-step test that uses a scope to look for growths called polyps in your colon or large intestine and rectum. A polyp is a small clump of cells on the colon's lining. Most polyps are harmless, but some can develop into cancer. If pre-cancerous polyps are found, they can be removed during the procedure. Polyp removal offers protection against developing colorectal cancer.
- **Stool-Based Test:** This test detects blood or altered DNA in the stool. A colonoscopy will be required as a follow-up procedure if it detects blood (a positive test). This test is typically performed annually.

Getting a screening done early is essential. Early-stage colon cancer often has no symptoms, so it is vital to address the cancer early while it is still highly treatable.

If you are experiencing any symptoms, you need to contact your healthcare provider. Please do not put off talking about symptoms or ignore them. Colorectal cancer symptoms include blood in the stool, changes in bowel habits that last more than a few days, rectal pain, abdominal pain, unexpected weight loss, or unexplained or new anemia.

If you are age 45 or older, get screened. Encourage family members and friends to do the same. Early detection saves lives.