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Asheville physician advises those age 50+ to overcome fear of colonoscopy

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Written by **Dr. Brent Jeffries**
Guest Columnist

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Most healthy 50-year-olds, like everyone else, dread the thought of having a colonoscopy. It sounds embarrassing. It seems like an inappropriate invasion of your body.

But it could save your life.

I have patients who felt completely well, but wisely followed the advice of their primary care physician to come for a screening colonoscopy and were found to have early-stage colon cancer. As a result they were treated and cured.

Colon cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S. About 1 in 19 Americans will develop colon cancer in their lifetime.

But this disease is often preventable. That's because colon cancer usually starts out as a precancerous growth called a polyp. Polyps have the risk of progressing over time into cancer. If these polyps are detected and removed, then the odds of cancer developing are greatly reduced.

Colon cancer screening involves testing people for cancer or precancerous polyps before they have any symptoms. That's important, because after symptoms arise the disease will often be more advanced and the chance of cure reduced.

Most experts recommend starting screening colonoscopies at age 50 for people at average risk. Some recommend age 45 for African-Americans, who may have a slightly higher risk.

What's it like to have a colonoscopy? The hardest part is the preparation necessary to clean out the colon. The day before the test you may only ingest clear liquids such as sodas, tea, jello and broth. That evening you take a powerful liquid laxative which will flush out all the stool from the colon. Be aware that it's highly effective.

Almost all patients say that once you've completed the prep the most difficult part is over. At the endoscopy unit, a nurse starts an IV line through which sedatives are given.

Some patients then sleep through the entire exam. Others are more lightly sedated and actually watch part of the exam on a video screen; additional sedation can be given if needed.

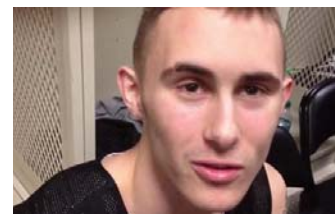
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A flexible scope is advanced through the rectum and colon. If polyps are found, they are removed at that time. After the exam the patient is monitored in a recovery room about 30 minutes prior to heading out to eat a normal diet.



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Certain patients are at higher risk for colon cancer, including those with inflammatory bowel disease or a family history of colon cancer. These patients usually require earlier or more frequent screening.

Symptoms of colon cancer include abdominal pain, a change in bowel habits, blood in the stool, weight loss or anemia. Other problems can also cause these symptoms, but if these develop you should see your physician.

There are other options for colon cancer screening which you can discuss with your physician. But colonoscopy has been proven to reduce the risk of developing colon cancer, and just last month in a study in the New England Journal of Medicine, to reduce the risk of dying from colon cancer. It's worth a little embarrassment.

Dr. Brent Jeffries is a board-certified gastroenterologist and has been with Asheville Gastroenterology Associates since 1991. He is the president of the Western Carolina Medical Society Foundation.

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