

Colonoscopies can foil cancer

When we think of cancer prevention, we typically think of those we hear the most about, such as breast cancer or lung cancer. One of the most common cancers is actually colon and rectal cancer: cancer of the large intestine and lower part of the digestive system. It is the third most common cancer and the second-leading cause of cancer death in the U.S. — and early detection dramatically increases the survival rate.

More than 145,000 new cases of colon cancer have been diagnosed in the U.S. over the past five years, according to the National Cancer Institute. If detected before it spreads, the five-year survival rate is about 90

percent — but if not caught before this point, the survival rate dips to just 10 percent.

The exact causes of colon cancer are unknown. One of the most important preventive steps is to get a colonoscopy, a screening test to detect any signs of colon and rectal cancer.

A colonoscopy is a procedure to see inside the colon and rectum. Used as either a screening test or a diagnostic tool, it can help your doctor investigate unusual symptoms such as unexplained changes in bowel habits, abdominal pain, rectal bleeding and weight loss.

A colonoscopy is performed using a long, thin, flexible tube, which is inserted through the rectum into the

lower digestive tract while the patient is sedated or asleep. The tube is equipped with a light and a tiny camera that transmits images of the patient's intestinal lining to a computer screen located at the bedside. This enhanced view allows the doctor to see inflamed tissue and any abnormal growths.

If polyps (growths) are found during the exam, they are quickly and painlessly removed at that time, and later tested in a laboratory for signs of cancer.

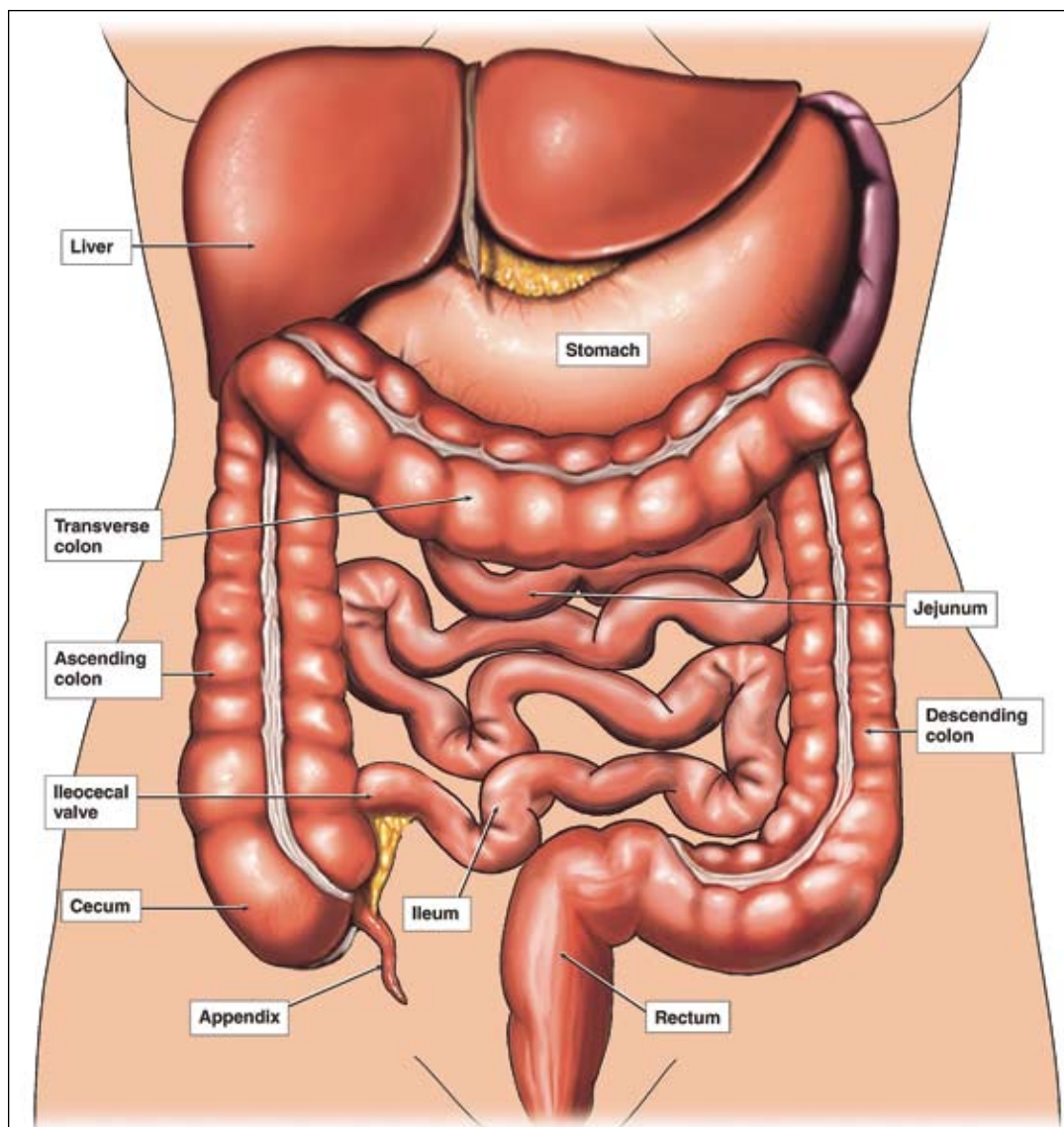
Polyps are common in adults, and usually harmless. However, most colorectal cancer begins as a polyp, so removing polyps early is an effective prevention method. Your doctor can

also take samples from abnormal-looking tissues — a biopsy — during the colonoscopy, so that any suspicious areas can be examined for signs of disease and treated, if necessary.

The American Cancer Society recommends a routine colonoscopy screening for all adult men and women beginning at age 50, or earlier if you have specific risk factors. Your doctor can provide guidance about the right time to begin and the frequency of testing, but industry guidelines suggest that a repeat screening be conducted every 10 years for adults with normal risk, and sometimes more often if you have a family history of colon cancer or other risk factors.

Your risk level for colon cancer varies according to your age, gender and ethnic background, as well as your overall health and lifestyle. Factors that affect your risk level include:

- Advancing age (over age 50)
- Male gender





By Dr. John Lang

- African American ethnic status
- A family or personal history of polyps (growths inside the rectum or colon), or colorectal cancer
- A high-fat diet
- Certain digestive diseases, diabetes, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis

Depending on your age, a colonoscopy screening may be a covered "wellness" test under your insurance plan – and most plans cover a colonoscopy completely as a follow-up test or diagnostic tool. Check with your insurance provider and your doctor's office for help in scheduling a screening exam and making sure it is covered by insurance.

Remember, colon cancer can be prevented even before it starts. Unlike other cancers that are discovered after they have started, colon cancer starts as a polyp, the pre-cancerous lesion detected during colonoscopy. When a polyp is removed, so is the potential for that polyp to cause cancer, and the need for surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, etc.

If everyone had a colonoscopy, all the colon and rectal cancers would be discovered as polyps and removed, and no one would have colon cancer. That would be a wonderful thing.

Please consider scheduling a colonoscopy, or even just a doctor's visit to talk about your digestive health, constipation, diarrhea or whatever you have questions about. If you don't want to do the colonos-

copy for yourself, please do it for your family and loved ones.

To learn more, visit SMMCCares.com click on "Health Resources," "Interactive Tools," and "Quizzes" to access the Colorectal Cancer Risk Assessment, Colorectal Cancer: Test Your Knowledge Quiz, Nutrition and Cancer Quiz, Colorectal Cancer Quiz, or Cancer Warning Signs Quiz. Or, call Family Medical Center Surgical Associates at 432-263-6018 to schedule a screening test today.

Dr. John Lang is originally from Hershey, Penn., and attended Al-

leghey College and Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine. Dr. Lang completed his General Surgery training at Pinnacle Health Hospitals in Harrisburg, Penn., a colon and rectal surgery fellowship at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Mich., and is Board-Certified in General Surgery. Remember that this information is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor, but rather to increase awareness and help equip patients with information and facilitate conversations with your physician that will benefit your health.