

The secret's out: Talk to your family about colon cancer

Embarrassment about colon cancer makes it a silent killer, says wife of patient

After completing a five-mile run, Ron King, 49, could not shake his concern about a lump in his lower abdomen which had bothered him all day. When Ron went to his doctor, he knew something wasn't right. However, he was young, active and ate healthily, so he did not assume it was something serious.

Unfortunately, it was. Ron's lump was a large tumor caused by colon cancer. Within the year, Ron's health deteriorated, and his family wondered, *is there something we could have done?*

Screening for colon cancer makes it one of the most preventable forms of cancer because of its telltale precursors – polyps. Polyps are bumps that form inside the colon which can be easily detected with a routine colonoscopy. If a polyp is found during a colonoscopy it can be removed immediately.

University of Wisconsin Comprehensive Cancer Center (UWCCC) oncologist Dan Mulkerin, MD, who treated Ron, said proper screening could eliminate as much as 90 percent of diagnosed colon cancer.

“Colon cancer is one of the most preventable diseases,” Mulkerin says. “You can prevent it just by going through the screening.”

Although colon cancer can be avoided, it kills almost 50,000 people each year. It is the second leading cause of cancer death, and a number of reasons explain why.

One factor is the often fatal change from the pre-cancerous polyp to a cancerous tumor. Once colon cancer has developed, it can be quickly fatal.

Ron's wife, Barb, recalls, “That's the problem with colon cancer – by the time you actually have it, there's not much you can do.”

“In the early stages there are no symptoms,” Mulkerin explains, “regular screening is the only way to find a polyp. However, only 15-20 percent of people eligible for a colonoscopy have had one done.”

Another reason is embarrassment. Traditional colonoscopies while clinic procedure, are invasive. And, many adults who have polyps removed do not discuss it with their family members, the very people who may be more susceptible to colon cancer. Barb encourages family members to talk about colon cancer screening and their results.

“Ron's sister had polyps at age 30, and she didn't realize it was a big deal,” Barb said. “If you have a polyp, be insistent about your family members getting screened.”

“Communication between family members is very important,” agrees Mulkerin, “unfortunately it is still not a topic openly discussed. Two-thirds of people who are at risk fail to be screened because they did not know they were even at risk.”

Mulkerin cautions that family history is not be the only factor for a colonoscopy. Anyone over age 50 is considered to be at average risk for colon cancer.

“Seventy-five percent of cases come from this group,” Mulkerin warns.

To commemorate Ron's battle, Barb and her family started Ron's Fund, a colon cancer awareness program that focuses on prevention.

"We wanted to do something that could make an impact," Barb explains. "There's some good education out there, but not enough awareness."

Because Ron always ran in the annual University of Wisconsin-Madison Crazylegs race, Ron's Fund sponsored a team of family and friends in the 2006 event.

"We had 40 team members and we all wore a special shirt with a message about cancer screening and prevention," Barb said. "We were spotlighted on two news stations, and from that people are still sending in contributions."

Barb hopes the donations to Ron's Fund will provide support to run articles and ads about the need for colon cancer screening, and potentially change guidelines to screen adults earlier and more often.

"Colon cancer occurs in adults younger than age 50," explains Barb. "If you look at national statistics, polyp disease really starts between age 40 and 49."

These statistics have special meaning to Barb.

"Ron was only 49 when he was diagnosed," Barb said. "During his treatment we found out that six of his high school friends were being treated for metastatic colon cancer, and many of his friends got a colonoscopy and found precancerous polyps."

To combat the discomfort and embarrassment many patients experience, doctors are currently developing new screening methods that are easier and less invasive.

The three-dimensional computed tomography (CT) colonography, allows patients to have a "virtual colonoscopy." The technology detects polyps by giving doctors a 3D simulated image of the inside of the colon. Many people find it an attractive option because the virtual colonoscopy is done without inserting a scope through the length of the colon, a reason why many patients avoid traditional colonoscopies.

Another alternative allows oncologists to examine a stool sample for the presence of blood, called a fecal occult blood test, but the test is not completely accurate.

Doctors are developing another test that looks at DNA in the patient's stool. Mulkerin says in about five years the test will be able to predict if a polyp or tumor is growing in the colon, making it even less invasive than a virtual colonoscopy.

"This is an incredible time to be working in the field of colon cancer in terms of the number of advances," says Mulkerin. But, he cautions, "The main message remains unchanged – screening colonoscopies still need to be performed."

He stresses that people should not let embarrassment or fear diminish their colon health, "The price of dying from embarrassment is too high."

Barb agrees. "We watched Ron fight a horrific battle in a year – we don't want that to happen to other people."