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MARCH INTO COLORECTAL CANCER AWARENESS MONTH
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March is colorectal cancer awareness month. Colorectal cancer, otherwise known as colon cancer, is the second deadliest cancer of men and women in the US, but with knowledge and preventative measures that can be changed. Colorectal cancer occurs in the colon or rectum. The colon also known as the large intestine while the rectum is the passageway between the colon and the anus. Abnormal growths, or polyps, can develop in either the colon or rectum. These growths can become malignant and cause the majority of colorectal cancer cases.

Colorectal cancer affects both men and women. It is more likely to affect individuals fifty years of age and older — these individuals account for ninety percent of cases. Risk factors that elevate the chance of being affected by colorectal cancer include inflammatory bowel disease, ulcerative colitis, Crohn’s disease, personal or family history of colorectal cancer and genetic syndromes that cause a higher chance of cancer in the colon or rectum. Lifestyle factors can also put individuals at a higher risk, such as a lack of physical activity, low consumption of fruits and vegetables, a low-fiber and high-fat diet, obesity, alcohol consumption and tobacco use.

Colorectal cancer and colorectal polyps can cause symptoms such as blood in or on stool, stomach pains, aches and cramps and weight loss for unknown reasons. Colorectal cancer and polyps may not always cause symptoms so it is crucial to regularly be screened.

Regular screenings are key to prevent colorectal cancer. Colorectal cancer almost always develops because of colorectal polyps; a screening test can help identify polyps so they can be removed before they become cancerous. Screening tests also can help diagnose colorectal cancer in early stages when treatment works best. Regular screenings should begin at age fifty; the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends regular screenings until age seventy-five. Screenings may need to begin before age fifty if an individual is at high risk for colorectal cancer or polyps. Three different tests are recommended to screen for colorectal cancer and polyps. According to the CDC, a high-sensitivity fecal occult blood test (FOBT) should be conducted every year; a flexible sigmoidoscopy should be done every five years with a high-sensitivity FOBT every three years; a colonoscopy should be performed every ten years.

For more information about colorectal cancer contact the Monongalia County Health Department at (304) 598-5100 or visit the health department website at  http://www.monchd.org/.

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