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Reversing Oregon's low rate of screening for colon cancer

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People are most likely to get screened if they're encouraged by someone they know and trust, researchers have found.

Unlike most cancer screenings, tests for colorectal cancer can detect tumors before they even develop. That's because most cases start as noncancerous polyps in the lining of the large intestine. Detecting and removing polyps prevents them from becoming malignant tumors.

But only 59 percent of the Oregon residents who should be screened actually are. The national rate, 65 percent, isn't much better. And colon cancer remains the second leading cancer killer in the U.S. among malignancies affecting women and men, after lung cancer.

A public health campaign **kicking off this week** in Oregon uses the power of social networks to promote colon cancer screening. The Oregon Health Authority is asking women and men who've been through a colonoscopy or other screening tests to explain the process to family and friends.

"Getting screened for colorectal cancer was a no brainer. It was easy," says Astoria resident Bill Lind, in one of the campaign's recorded messages for radio. "The difficult part was the prep and that wasn't even that bad. Honestly, it was a piece of cake: go in, go to sleep and then go home. I plan to get screened again when it's time and encourage people in my life to do the same."

In another message, Wendy Richardson of Gearhart tells how she lost her mother to colorectal cancer. "She was my best friend. And she was taken too early from me and my family," Richardson says. "Now, my siblings and I get screened regularly to prevent the cancer. I don't want my kids to lose their mom like I lost mine."

When people who have not been screened **are asked why**, many say their doctor never told them it was necessary or that they didn't know about the tests. Many believe the test is too costly, even though Medicare and new private insurance plans are required to cover colorectal cancer screening with no co-payments or deductibles. A lot of people say the tests are too embarrassing. And many just fear the results.

"We found that people are more likely to get screened if they are encouraged by someone they know, someone they trust," says Donald Shipley, cancer control programs manager with the Oregon Health Authority. He says the campaign is making an extra effort to reach African Americans, who have significantly higher rates of colon cancer mortality, and Native Americans and residents of some rural counties who have very low rates of screening.

A \$750,000 grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is paying for the Oregon campaign, an amount that can potentially be renewed for another four years. The CDC, which awarded grants to 20 states, aims to increase screening rates to 80 percent in the appropriate populations.

Routine checks for early signs of colorectal cancer should begin at age 50 for most people, age 45 for African Americans, and earlier if there is a family history of the disease or if there are other risk factors, such as ulcerative colitis, Crohn's Disease or irritable bowel syndrome. After age 75, the risks of routine screening start to outweigh the benefits.

Oregon's campaign began with **a trial run in Clatsop County** earlier this year. In a survey of 196 county residents after the campaign, about half recalled seeing or hearing its messages in the media. Among those with recollections, about 80 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the campaign made them more likely to recommend colorectal cancer screening to people they know.

During the pilot campaign, Dr. Truman Sasaki, a surgeon in Clatsop County, performed 220 colonoscopies, up from 149 in the same period a year ago. He said 20 patients came without a doctor's referral; they either heard the campaign or were encouraged to get screened by someone they knew.

– **Joe Rojas-Burke**

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