

Posted on Fri, Mar. 11, 2011

## If you are 50, your time has come

By MALENA MARCH  
Special to El Nuevo Herald



Peter Kohama

The colonoscopy: uncomfortable but necessary

“It’s one of the best tests for early detection [of cancer],” said gastroenterologist Dr. Stephen Eskin.

Many people wish they could avoid it, but it is a preventive exam and it is almost mandatory for people age 50 and beyond.

Colon cancer is caused by polyps, or extra tissue that grows on the walls of the large intestine. Though most of the polyps are not dangerous, some could grow cancerous or may already be cancerous.

The age when a person is most susceptible to develop colon cancer is 65. To monitor the polyps, Eskin recommends a colonoscopy every five or 10 years. It is after age 50 that the body begins to produce polyps.

For people with this type of cancer in their family history, it is recommended to have the test performed every three to five years.

“At 50 it could be a small polyp, but at 65 it could already be a well-developed cancer,” he said.

When this happens, other organs are often compromised and it could be too late to conduct an effective treatment. This is why “colonoscopies are not only necessary to detect cancer but also to avoid its development,” the doctor said.

Besides helping to find polyps, colonoscopies are also used to remove them for later analysis.

“We try to take out polyps when they can be removed,” Eskin said. “If there is too much tissue, a portion is removed to perform a biopsy and, depending on the results, it is decided whether surgery is necessary.”

Although colonoscopies are highly effective for early detection, many people avoid them because they’re perceived to be an uncomfortable procedure, although patients are usually given anesthesia to sedate them.

The doctor inserts a long, flexible tube known as a colonoscope into the patient's rectum. A diminutive camera at the tube's end is guided slowly inside the colon to detect polyps. The instrument is manipulated to follow the trajectory and the natural curves of the large intestine. It also blows air into the intestine to expand the area to be examined.

The procedure lasts from 30 to 60 minutes. The colon must be completely empty, which is why a liquid diet is prescribed days before the test. A laxative is taken the night before the test. Due to the effect of the sedatives, which can last a couple of hours, it is important to have someone accompany the patient.

Doctors don't know with certainty how polyps are formed. However, some studies show that a diet rich in fiber protects the body from forming them.

"The fat, however, remains in the intestine and it could play a role in developing the disease," Eskin said.

---

© 2011 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.  
<http://www.miamiherald.com>