



SAUK PRAIRIE MEMORIAL  
HOSPITAL & CLINICS

ABOUT US

EVENTS &  
PROGRAMS

HOW TO FIND US

FACILITY MAP

AFFILIATED  
PROVIDERS

SITE INDEX

Services

Medical Staff

Medical Clinics

Hospital  
Foundation

Volunteer  
Opportunities

Employment  
Opportunities

## Colonoscopy best defense against colorectal cancer

Written by Haley Jorgensen

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Prairie du Sac, Wis.-- Preventing colorectal cancer - the third most common cancer and second leading cause of cancer death for men and women in the United States - isn't as difficult as one might think. Regular screenings can help doctors detect and remove polyps, or growths, before they become cancerous, according to [Ted Parins, MD](#), a general surgeon specializing in laparoscopic and colorectal surgery at Sauk Prairie Memorial Hospital & Clinics. But the idea of having a colonoscopy, a procedure in which the entire colon is inspected for growths and cancer, can unnecessarily induce a state of panic in some people - leading them to not have the procedure at all.



Such mentality simply isn't healthy, according to Parins, who maintains a colonoscopy is a person's best defense against developing cancer in the first place. There is no reason to fear the procedure, according to Cathy Hambrecht, a nurse of 29 years who works closely with Parins. "Preparation is done in the privacy of your home. The procedure is performed in an outpatient setting at the hospital," she explains. "Patients come in an hour before and leave an hour afterward. The total time it takes is around two and a half to three hours." Patients receive both pain medication and a sedative to ensure maximum comfort during the procedure. If a polyp or growth is discovered via colonoscopy, it can be removed immediately and tested for cancer.

### One in 18 Affected

Colorectal cancer refers to cancer of the rectum or colon - a disease affecting one in 18 Americans, according to the American Cancer Society. Regular screenings by age 50 are important, since early signs of the disease sometimes go unnoticed. "But if you have a family history of colorectal cancer, you should receive screenings earlier," says Hambrecht. Risk factors include age, family history, unhealthy eating habits, smoking, bowel disorders and a previous diagnosis of cancer or polyps. Parins recommends individuals with a family history of colorectal cancer begin screenings 10 years before the age at which their family member was diagnosed.

### Screenings Important as Symptoms Can Go Unnoticed

Symptoms aren't always clear-cut, according to Parins, increasing the importance of regular screenings. As cancer progresses, however, symptoms including the following may appear:

- blood in stools and/or rectal bleeding
- a constant feeling that you need to have a bowel movement
- constipation and/or diarrhea
- abdominal pain and/or bloating
- fatigue and/or weight loss

"Polyps can take five to 10 years to grow into cancer," explains Hambrecht. "If we can get rid of the polyp, you have a great chance of never developing cancer." And, if cancer is detected early, patients have a five-year survival rate of 90 percent or greater, according to the Colon Cancer Alliance.

### Types of Screenings

There are many types of screenings to help determine if a patient has cancer or potentially threatening polyps. The most simple is the **fecal occult blood test**, which determines if there

is blood in the stool. If so, more testing is typically recommended to locate the source of the bleeding. This test, which can be conducted by a family physician, is recommended annually after age 50 for people with low risk for colorectal cancer. **Flexible sigmoidoscopy**, recommended every five years, screens the rectum and lower section of the colon for cancer or polyps using a thin illuminated tube.

In a **double-contrast barium enema** screening, recommended every five years, the rectum is expanded and X-rays are taken of the colon and rectum.

A **colonoscopy** screens the entire colon for polyps and cancer, which if discovered, can be simultaneously removed for testing. This test is performed every 10 years beginning at the age of 50, for those with low risk.

The beauty of a colonoscopy, according to Parins and Hambrecht, is that the entire colon is visually examined, not just a portion of it. And, during the same procedure, if a growth is found, it is immediately removed. Using other procedures, removal of the growth isn't possible, according to Parins. In the event a growth is detected using another screening method, in most cases a colonoscopy is subsequently performed to remove it.

Routine screenings combined with a healthy lifestyle are the best methods for preventing colorectal cancer, according to Hambrecht. "Eat five or more servings of veggies and fruits per day; limit your consumption of red meats and alcohol; choose foods high in fiber; maintain a healthy weight; exercise and avoid smoking," she says.

As more individuals embrace regular screenings, per a doctor's recommendation, fewer will develop cancer, according to Parins. Others, who do develop the disease, will benefit from early detection and treatment.

*To learn more about colorectal cancer and prevention, ask your family doctor, or schedule an appointment with [Parins](#) by calling Surgical Associates, in Prairie du Sac at 608-643-2431. At Surgical Associates, Parins and colleague [John DeGiovanni, MD](#), specialize in a variety of surgical treatments affecting the digestive system, gastrointestinal tract, large and small bowels, rectum, spleen and more.*

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