

# Colon cancer screening can save lives

Father Joseph McDonough figured it'd be a routine procedure.

He felt healthy and had no reason to believe he wasn't on that morning last August.

Today, he views the procedure - a colonoscopy at St. Agnes Hospital - much differently.

"No question about it that it did save my life," said Father McDonough, who assists at Holy Trinity, Glen Burnie. "I never had any symptoms before the colonoscopy or after - never. I was shocked."

Father McDonough, 67, had early stage colon cancer - more formally known as colorectal cancer - so it could be treated without chemotherapy, said his surgeon, Dr. Justin Somerville, director of St. Agnes' Colorectal Cancer Center.

"That's what screening is all about - testing people without symptoms," Dr. Somerville said. "And the idea is to catch things early before they present with symptoms because we know that if you catch the cancer before the symptoms occur, the likelihood of a cure is much higher."

Father McDonough returned for a second colonoscopy about five years after his first.

If his colon cancer had not been detected early, Father McDonough said: "It would have just grown and grown to a point where I did feel symptoms. It would have been a far more serious thing and probably fatal."

March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, and experts are stressing the importance of screenings to detect colon cancer and precancerous polyps.

A colonoscopy examines the length of the colon using a small camera attached to a flexible tube. The colonoscopy is one of several methods of screening for colon cancer or polyps, which can become cancerous.

All men and women 50 and over should be routinely screened, according to the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy.

Some, such as those with a family history of colon cancer or those who have Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, may need to be screened earlier or more often, according to the American Cancer Society.

Dr. Somerville said the colonoscopy enables surgeons to detect polyps, or lesions, and remove them during the procedure.

"We can remove these pre-cancerous lesions relatively easily during the colonoscopy, and it actually prevents you from developing cancer later on," he said.

Colon cancer is almost completely preventable with appropriate screening, Dr. Somerville said.

Nationwide, death rates from colon cancer are declining, partly because of screening and removal of pre-cancerous polyps, but only about half of those who should have screening procedures receive one, and colon cancer kills about 50,000 Americans a year, the ASGE says.

The society and other organizations call the colonoscopy the "gold standard" for screening.

Other methods the society lists include:

- A stool blood test, taken at home using stool samples, detects small amounts of blood in the stool.
- A flexible sigmoidoscopy uses a lighted tube that examines the lower part of the colon.
- A barium enema uses a chalky substance, given as an enema. When air is pumped into the colon, X-rays take pictures.
- A virtual colonoscopy relies on a small tube placed in the rectum. Air is then pumped into the colon to inflate the bowel, and a CT scan creates an image of the colon.