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AFRICAN AMERICANS AND COLON CANCER: WHY SCREENING SAVES LIVES

OAK BROOK, Ill. - February 16, 2009 - In late-2008, a report released from leading U.S. cancer organizations including the American Cancer Society and National Cancer Institute announced that, for the first time, both incidence (the rate at which new cancers are diagnosed) and death rates from colon cancer were decreasing. Prevention through screening for colon cancer, also referred to as colorectal cancer, was a key reason for the decline. During this Black History Month, the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE), representing the specialists in colon cancer screening, reminds African Americans to speak to their doctor about when and how often they should be screened for colon cancer.

Colon cancer is a preventable disease that does not discriminate against race or gender, age is the single most important risk factor. Guidelines advise colon cancer screening start at age 50, however, some studies have shown that African Americans are more frequently diagnosed with colon cancer at a younger age, leading some experts to suggest that African Americans begin screening prior to age 50.

“The ASGE recommends colon cancer screening begin at age 50 for all men and women at average risk for the disease. Some people, however, may have certain risk factors that make screening necessary at a younger age,” said John L. Petrini, MD, FASGE, president of the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy. “You can do something about this disease, and the first step is becoming educated about colon cancer as well as your family’s medical history. If you have a family history of colon cancer or polyps, which are growths in the colon that can lead to colon cancer, you should talk with your doctor because you may need to be screened for colon cancer prior to age 50. Working together, you and your doctor can prevent colon cancer.”

Screening is important because it allows the doctor to find polyps and remove them before they turn into cancer. Colonoscopy screening is considered the best test for colon cancer for its ability to find and remove these polyps at the same time.

Statistics show that death rates from colon cancer are higher among African Americans than any other population group in the U.S. According to a recent report from the American Cancer Society, among African Americans, incidence rates are more than 20 percent higher and mortality (death) rates are about 45 percent higher than those in white Americans. These numbers are sobering, and unfortunately, at this time, research is not definitive as to why incidence and death rates are higher in the African American community. Studies do show that prevention through screening works, though not enough people are being screened in the U.S. among all races and genders. While all patients should ask their doctor about an appropriate screening schedule, African Americans are urged to be particularly vigilant and aggressive due to their increased risk.

“We urge patients to log on to ASGE’s colon cancer awareness Web site www.screen4coloncancer.org to learn more about this disease and to find an expertly-trained colonoscopist to perform their colonoscopy for colon cancer screening,” added Petrini.

Colon cancer kills nearly 50,000 people each year. Many of those deaths could be prevented with earlier detection. To learn about colon cancer prevention, log on to www.screen4coloncancer.org. The site offers visitors a wealth of vital information including disease facts about colon cancer, screening options, what to expect during a colonoscopy, frequently asked questions, the latest news about colon cancer such as studies and statistics, links to patient support and advocacy groups, educational videos and how to find a qualified doctor in your area. The content is available in English, Spanish and Chinese, and the site gives patients an opportunity to share their personal stories about their experience with colon cancer.

In addition, visitors can send their loved ones who are 50 and over a birthday e-Card featuring cartoon characters “Peter and Polly Polyp™” that reminds the recipient to get screened for colon cancer. The animated flash e-Card depicts a birthday celebration with the main message “Don’t let Peter and Polly Polyp™ crash your birthday party. Get screened for colon cancer today...”

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About the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy

Founded in 1941, the mission of the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy is to be the leader in advancing patient care and digestive health by promoting excellence in gastrointestinal endoscopy. ASGE, with nearly 11,000 members worldwide, promotes the highest standards for endoscopic training and practice, fosters endoscopic research, recognizes distinguished contributions to endoscopy, and is the foremost resource for endoscopic education. Visit www.asge.org and www.screen4coloncancer.org for more information and to find a qualified doctor in your area.

About Endoscopy

Endoscopy is performed by specially-trained physicians called endoscopists using the most current technology to diagnose and treat diseases of the gastrointestinal tract. Using flexible, thin tubes called endoscopes, endoscopists are able to access the human digestive tract without incisions via natural orifices. Endoscopes are designed with high-intensity lighting and fitted with precision devices that allow viewing and treatment of the gastrointestinal system.