

With Attached Photo: Aleem A. Ali, MD, Southeast Georgia Physician Associates-Gastroenterology

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Don't Skip the Scope ***Understanding the Importance of Colon Cancer Screening***

BRUNSWICK, Georgia: March 27, 2026 – It's not often that a cancer is described as curable. It's even less common to hear it referred to as preventable. However, that's exactly how Aleem A. Ali, MD, talks about colon cancer—one of the most common cancers in the world.



“Each year, more than 150,000 new cases are diagnosed. In the United States alone, it is the third most commonly diagnosed cancer and the second leading cause of cancer-related death when men and women are combined,” reveals Ali, a gastroenterologist with Southeast Georgia Physician Associates-Gastroenterology who specializes in colorectal cancer screening and prevention. “Yet, when detected early, colon cancer is highly treatable and often curable. And it is one of the few cancers we can actually prevent through screening.”

With March being National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, it's the perfect time to learn more about colon cancer symptoms, screening options and lifestyle habits that can help reduce your risk. And it's important to start with an understanding of what this cancer really is.

Colon Cancer or Colorectal Cancer?

While you may hear both phrases, they are related but not necessarily interchangeable. Colon cancer is a disease found in the large intestine—and it actually is one form of colorectal cancer, which is an umbrella term that refers to cancers that start in either the colon or the rectum. Ultimately, the main difference is the location of the cancer; the symptoms, screenings and preventative measures are largely the same.

Symptoms: Sometimes Silent But Serious

According to Ali, early colon cancer often causes no symptoms. In fact, polyps or early tumors in your colon can be there for years before any signs are associated with them. When symptoms do appear, the cancer may already be beyond stage I or II. Those symptoms can include:

- A change in bowel habits, including diarrhea, constipation or narrowing of the stools
- Blood in the stool or rectal bleeding
- Unexplained anemia or fatigue
- Abdominal pain or cramping
- Unintentional weight loss

“These symptoms don't always mean cancer, but they should never be ignored,” Ali advises, adding that the later onset of symptoms is why regular screening is so critical. To stay ahead of the curve, you

should begin having screenings at age 45. However, if you have a family history of colon cancer or inflammatory bowel disease, your doctor may recommend getting tested as soon as age 40—or even younger. He adds, “If you’re eligible, get screened. And if you have symptoms, get checked.”

Paths to Prevention

In recent years, colon cancer screening has advanced significantly, offering patients more options than ever before. From noninvasive stool-based tests to computed tomography (CT) colonography – a virtual colonoscopy that uses detailed images of the colon and rectum – today’s screenings can be tailored to individual needs. Still, Ali emphasizes that the colonoscopy remains the “gold standard” for detecting and preventing colorectal cancer.

“A colonoscopy allows us to detect and remove precancerous polyps in the same procedure, actually preventing cancer before it starts,” he says. With that in mind, most people with normal results only need a colonoscopy every 10 years. If polyps are found, your health care provider will guide you on any follow-up care or additional screening needed.

Of course, in between those screenings, your lifestyle habits can be a game changer. Ali suggests eating a diet high in fiber, fruits and vegetables, as well as limiting red and processed meats, maintaining a healthy weight, exercising, avoiding smoking and limiting alcohol consumption. He explains, “Even small changes can add up to meaningful risk reduction.”

Don’t Delay, Screen Today

There is encouraging news, as rates of colon cancer have been declining in older adults. Yet Ali also notes that there is a concerning rise among younger people. “This is why awareness is so important,” he concludes. “My biggest advice is simple: don’t delay screening. If we normalize screening the same way we do blood pressure or cholesterol checks, we can dramatically reduce the impact of this disease. Colon cancer is common, preventable and treatable when caught early. Screening saves lives.”

To learn more, visit sghs.org/gastroenterology. To make an appointment with Southeast Georgia Physician Associates-Gastroenterology, call 912-466-4200.

ABOUT SOUTHEAST GEORGIA HEALTH SYSTEM

Southeast Georgia Health System is a not-for-profit health system comprised of two acute care hospitals, two Cancer Care Centers and multiple specialty care centers, including orthopaedic and spine care, joint replacement, breast care, maternity, outpatient rehabilitation, sleep management and wound care. The Brunswick Campus Cancer Care Center is accredited by the American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer and is one of the few centers in Georgia to offer CyberKnife® M6 with MLC. Additionally, the Brunswick Campus is accredited by The Joint Commission as an Advanced Primary Stroke Center and the Camden Campus is accredited as an Acute Stroke Ready Hospital. The Southeast Georgia Physician Associates medical group includes more than 190 providers working in 20 different medical specialties at more than 54 locations. The Health System is part of Coastal Community Health, a regional affiliation between Baptist Health and Southeast Georgia Health System, a highly integrated hospital network focused on significant initiatives designed to enhance the quality and value of care provided to our contiguous communities. For more information, visit sghs.org.

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