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From Screenings to Surgery, Tri-City Medical Center Offers a Broad Range of Colorectal Cancer Services

The American Cancer Society and Colorectal Cancer Alliance estimate that more than 150,000 people of all ages in the U.S. will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 2022. This disease is the third most commonly diagnosed cancer and the second leading cause of death in men and women combined. Both organizations note that the rate of new cases continues to decline, thanks to healthier lifestyles and screenings.

“The importance of getting screened cannot be emphasized enough as some patients may not have obvious symptoms,” said Kristen Blaker, MD, FASCRS, FACS, a colorectal surgeon at Coastal Surgeons, which is affiliated with Tri-City Medical Center. “There are several at-home, stool-based screening tests available for people who may not want to do a colonoscopy. These are a good first step, but a colonoscopy is considered the ‘gold-standard’ as it provides the most definitive results and can identify polyps before they turn cancerous.”



Kristen Blaker
MD, FASCRS, FACS

Other virtual screenings include computed tomography (CT) colonography and flexible sigmoidoscopy (FSIG), both recommended every five years. Stool-based tests, including the fecal immunochemical test (FIT) and guaiac-based fecal occult blood test (gFOBT), are provided by a doctor and need to be completed annually. FIT DNA kits, such as Cologuard, which is the only one approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), are shipped to people's home by the company and must then be sent back for testing.



Aaron Byzak with his grandmother, Hazel Mensching, and mother, Cassandra Byzak.

Colorectal cancer screening is now recommended for people at average risk starting at the age of 45, as the incidence rate is rising in younger adults, and it should be repeated every 10 years until the age of 75. For those with a personal or family history of the disease and polyps, or have inflammatory bowel disease, screening is recommended before age 45.

“Approximately 20% to 30% of colorectal cancer cases are associated with a family history of colon polyps,” said Dr. Blaker. “About three to five percent of those are actually associated with an identifiable colorectal family cancer syndrome, meaning there is an inherited gene mutation that is passed down in each generation. In these cases, genetic testing and counseling should be considered.”

Aaron Byzak, Chief External Affairs Officer for Tri-City Medical Center, started getting screened for colorectal cancer at age 35. “My mother passed away at 55 years of age from colorectal cancer,” said Byzak. “This disease has taken the lives of more than a half dozen of my family members. My siblings and I get screened regularly because if caught early, colorectal cancer can be prevented or treated with surgical intervention.”



Aaron Byzak
Chief External Affairs Officer

Once cancer is identified from a biopsy done during a colonoscopy, an oncologist will “stage” the colorectal cancer based on the size of the tumor, and if it has spread to lymph nodes or metastasized. Stages range from 0 to IV depending upon how far the cancer has spread inside and/or outside of the colon.

“Most colorectal cancers are treated with surgery and those in the higher stages may require chemotherapy,” said Dr. Blaker. “Early-stage cancers and polyps can be removed during a colonoscopy, whereas a colectomy is needed to remove all or

parts of the colon for later stage cancers. Once the tumor has been removed, the oncologist can test it genetically and tailor a patient's chemotherapy accordingly, as well as determine targeted drug therapy.”

“At Tri-City, we perform robotic-assisted colorectal surgery using the da Vinci® Xi surgical system,” added Dr. Blaker. “This minimally invasive approach means smaller incisions resulting in better outcomes, reduced hospital stay and quicker recovery. Through the hospital's Perioperative Surgical Home, we can provide enhanced recovery to our patients.”

Tri-City is the only hospital in San Diego County with a Perioperative Surgical Home to care for patients scheduled to have elective colorectal surgery. This is a multi-disciplinary, physician led team using evidence-based practices to care for the patient from the decision to have surgery and beyond discharge. This approach focuses the team's attention to maximize a patient's quick recovery.

Screening for colorectal cancer saves lives. Call Tri-City Medical Center today at 855-222-8262 to set up an appointment with a primary care doctor to schedule a screening. ■