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**COLON TESTING CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE!
The county and the American Cancer Society plan to get the word out**

Unlike many other cancers, colorectal cancer is an easy-to-diagnose disease that is almost always curable if caught early. So why do more than 200 Westchester residents die of the illness each year?

The problem is that so few people get the screening tests that can save their lives – only 25 percent of those at highest risk. Recognizing the importance of changing that equation, Westchester County and the American Cancer Society are launching a year-long campaign to promote regular screenings for colorectal cancer.

“Only 38 percent of those with colorectal cancer are diagnosed at that earliest to treat stage, before the cancer has spread to lymph nodes or other organs. That’s a totally unacceptable figure,” said County Executive Andy Spano. “I think many people are afraid of being tested and don’t realize that the procedure is relatively simple and painless and can truly save their lives. We want to get the facts out.”

Spano joined American Cancer Society Regional VP Rick Lepkowski and White Plains Hospital Center President & CEO Jon B. Schandler today at the White Plains Hospital Center Colon Cancer and GI Screening Center to announce plans for a community outreach effort emphasizing the importance of colon testing. The announcement also marked Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month.

Colon cancer is the second leading cancer killer in America (after lung cancer) and kills about 56,000 people a year nationwide. In Westchester alone, almost 600 people are diagnosed each year.

It’s a situation that can easily be improved, according to Lepkowski.

“Colon cancer doesn’t have to be deadly,” he said. “If the majority of Americans age 50 and older were screened for colorectal cancer, the death rate from the disease would drop by at least half.”

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Early detection can make a big difference. Colon cancer almost always starts with a polyp, and early detection can find and remove those polyps before cancer develops. Nationally people whose colon cancers are found at an early stage have five-year survival rates of 90 percent. For colon cancers found at a later, more advanced stage, the five-year survival rate drops to less than 10 percent.

“We are really pleased to be partnering with the County Executive and the American Cancer Society in trying to get the word out on the vital importance of colorectal cancer screening,” said Jon B. Schandler, President and Chief Executive Officer of White Plains Hospital Center. “Our Colon Cancer and GI Screening Center saw more than 7,600 patients in 2003 - an impressive number that we wish to see grow even higher because we know that education and screening are the number one tools for the prevention of cancer.”

The American Cancer Society recommends one of five testing methods beginning at age 50 or sooner for those at increased risk:

- Yearly fecal occult blood test (FOBT),
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years.
- Yearly FOBT combined with flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years.
- Double contrast barium enema every five years.
- Colonoscopy every 10 years.

People with a personal history of polyps, colon cancer, or inflammatory bowel disease or a family history of colon cancer or polyps are at a higher risk and may need to start testing earlier. Medicare covers the full range of colorectal cancer screenings.

Spano noted that getting the facts out about colorectal cancer is especially important in Westchester where the population is rapidly aging. About 90 percent of those with colorectal cancer are over age 50.

The county’s campaign, which will run through March 2005, will consist of public service advertising (on buses and the radio) as well as the creation of a community coalition to develop new health and public policy recommendations and organize public awareness activities throughout the year.

The American Cancer Society will conduct a survey of local medical providers to learn who is getting screened and who is not, and what needs to be done to get more people to be tested. The New York Medical College is expected to analyze the data, which will be released along with recommendations in the fall.

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Spano and the American Cancer Society are now lining up a coalition of service providers, community clinics, senior organizations – any group interested in the issue – willing to work to come up with ideas and activities to improve screening rates. A community forum is being planned for the fall and a series of activities will mark Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month next year.

Those without health insurance can still get tested. The Westchester County Department of Health provides a free fecal occult blood test kit for those who are over age 50. If the result of this fecal occult blood test (FOBT) is positive, the patient can be referred for a free colonoscopy.

The Health Department also provides free colorectal screening services for uninsured or underinsured persons of any age who have a diagnosed personal or family history of colorectal illness. Please contact the Health Department at (914) 813-5000 for more information and guidelines.

The American Cancer Society is the nationwide community-based voluntary health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem by preventing cancer, saving lives and diminishing suffering from cancer, through research, education, advocacy and service. For more information about the American Cancer Society, call 1-800-ACS-2345 or visit its web site at www.cancer.org.

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