

Hi, I'm Johanna Bendel and I'm a medical oncologist with Sarah Cannon and TN Oncology. I specialize in the treatment of patients with gastrointestinal cancers as well as patients on new drug clinical trials.

I'm really happy to be talking to you today on colon cancer. March is colorectal cancer awareness month, and I think it's very important that we think about this disease and try to prevent this disease, and for people that have colon cancer – we try to treat it the best we can. Colon cancer is pretty common in the United States – about 150,000 people are diagnosed with colon cancer in the United States every year. And about 50,000 people are going to die from colon cancer in the United States every year, so we have to do a much better job at catching it early and treating it early. Colon cancer is the third most common cancer death in the United States. One thing we can say about colon cancer is it can be caught early with the use of colonoscopy, fecal occult blood tests and sigmoidoscopy.

For the average person who does not have a relative or close relative with colon cancer, the average age you should start your screening is 50 years old. The screening consists of a colonoscopy once every 5 – 10 years or something called fecal occult blood testing where your doctor will give you cards to check your stool for blood with or without something called a flexible sigmoidoscopy. Using these mechanisms, we can actually catch colon cancer much earlier, and be able to cure people who are diagnosed with colon cancer at an early stage.

People who have relatives (and we call these 1st degree relatives: brothers or sisters, children, mothers or fathers) who have colon cancer that are diagnosed before the age of 50, sometimes just around the age of 50 – patients with these relatives should have their colon cancer screening done a little earlier. Definitely check in with your primary care physician and make sure they know about your family history of cancer to make sure that you get your screenings done at the appropriate time.

The other thing that we see is that people need to have good levels of calcium and Vitamin D in their diets. We have seen that levels of calcium and Vitamin D who have normal levels, seem to have less of a chance of developing colon cancer. At the Minnie Pearl, we have a nutritionist who can even help to suggest good dietary options and help you pick the right foods that will give you the best chance perhaps to prevent colon cancer in your body.

Patients that have colon cancer that is not caught on colonoscopy or colon cancer screening can sometimes present with different types of symptoms including abdominal pain, bloating, changes in the caliber of the stool – like a thinning of the stool, chronic diarrhea or blood in the stool. If you have any of these symptoms that seem to be lasting, that is a good reason to go to your primary care physician to have them check you out.

If you are diagnosed with colon cancer, the best chance at curing the colon cancer is surgery. Before you have surgery, doctors will check cat-scans on you to see if there

is any spread of the colon cancer. Sometimes, even if there is spread of colon cancer to other organs of the body, there is still sometimes possible chance of cure with surgery, often times that is combined with chemotherapy. For patients who have rectal cancer diagnosis, which is a cancer in the lower part of the colon, sometimes radiation therapy is used as well to treat patients. T

The best thing you can do when diagnosed with colon cancer is to get to a specialist right away. A surgeon is always a good first person to see to see if this cancer might be able to be removed by surgery. Patients should also see a medical oncologist at some point. Sometimes you see the medical oncologist after your surgery and the medical oncologist is used to determine whether or not you might need some chemotherapy after your surgery to prevent the colon cancer from coming back. Sometimes you might see the medical oncologist earlier, for instance if you have cancer that may have spread outside the colon early.

It is very scary to be diagnosed with cancer, but we want you to know that there are so many support systems out there, not only through your doctor, your doctor's office, the nurses, the research staff, but also through the Minnie Pearl, through social workers and nutritionists.