One Really Important Health Screening Everyone Should Get

March 3, 2013 By Kate Ferguson

Although I am the editor of a health magazine, I must admit, I have an aversion to wellness screenings. These are those critical exams doctors recommend so we know what is going on inside our bodies. Finally, though, after much soul-searching, I had my colonoscopy screening done.

I had postponed the test twice, but this time I kept my appointment at the surgery center, even though I was barely recovered from an upper respiratory infection that had sidelined me for three days. On my way there, I thought about the coming summer. I was in sync with the get-ready messages screamed by the usual barrage of warm-weather ads. I was prepping my body for a tune-up.

Simultaneously, I was also renewing my commitment to achieving better health. This screening was my way of preparing for summer, but from the inside out.

Indicated as one of the necessary tests to correctly diagnose my ongoing digestive problems, a colonoscopy is also one of the major wellness screenings for African Americans. Indeed, the American College of Gastroenterology recommends that African Americans--who are at greater risk for colon cancer--begin colorectal cancer screening at age 45 instead of 50.

Admittedly, like many people in general, I was also hesitant to take a colonoscopy. It is a test that allows a doctor to view the entire large intestine by inserting a thin, flexible tube, to which a tiny camera is attached, into the anus and colon. I had multiple fears about what the test might entail. Wouldn't it hurt? Wasn't it embarrassing? Wouldn't it be messy? Fortunately, when I accompanied my sister to her colorectal screening, I learned otherwise. When I underwent the screening, I was finally able to put my fears to rest.

According to a recent report in the Journal of the National Medical Association, the most common barriers to colonoscopy among African Americans include a lack of awareness about increased risk, fear of the results, worries that the test will be painful, mistrust of the health care system and poor access to health care.

Of these five reasons, all except the last applied to me. Now, no longer unaware of my risk factor and much better educated about colorectal cancer screening, I am passing on the news.

Most doctors agree that early detection is key to treating cancer and many other diseases that disproportionately affect African Americans. That's why I also feel we need to face our fears and educate ourselves about health.

Whether it’s cancer, diabetes, hypertension or HIV, it’s important to spring into action and get our health screenings scheduled--and done. The sooner you know there’s a problem, the faster you can do something about it.

And if there’s no problem whatsoever? Well, then, let’s celebrate in good health each coming season of our lives.

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