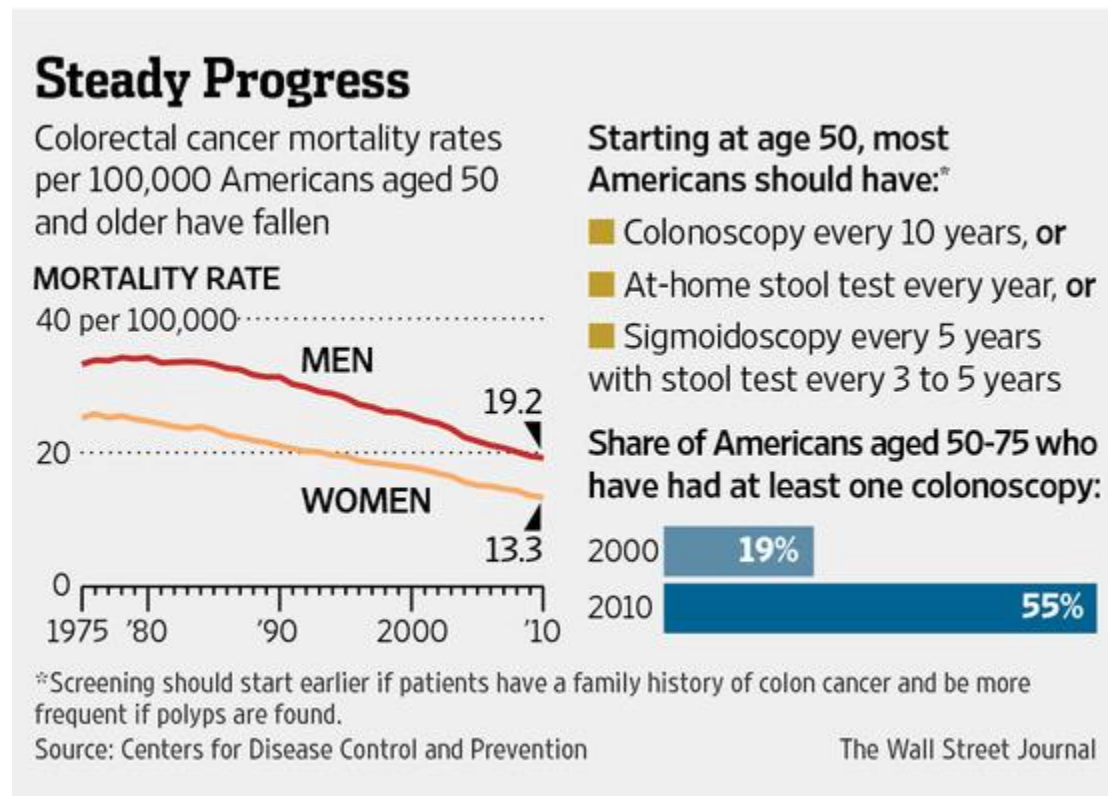


More Screenings Put Dent in Colon Cancer

Incidence of Disease Drops 30% Last Decade and Death Rates Keep Falling

By
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CONNECT



The incidence of colon cancer, declining since the mid-1980s, plunged a further 30% last decade among Americans 50 and older as more people had colonoscopies, a new study found.

The drop in colon-cancer death rates accelerated as well, falling about 3% a year between 2001 and 2010, compared with 2% a year in the previous decade, according to the American Cancer Society study of government data.

American Cancer Society Chief Medical Officer Otis Brawley estimated that without the widespread screening efforts that began in the 1980s, "we'd be seeing twice as many

deaths today. This study celebrates the fact that we've almost halved the mortality rate from colon cancer in the last 35 years."

Still, colon cancer remains the third-most-common cancer and the third leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S. More than 136,000 new cases, and 50,000 colon-cancer deaths, are expected this year.

The study found the positive trend was most pronounced among older Americans. The rate of colon cancers among those 65 and over dropped about 7% a year from 2008 to 2010. Meanwhile, the percentage of Americans who are up-to-date on recommended colon-cancer screening rose from 55% to 65% during the past decade.

Screening tests for breast and prostate cancer have come under fire in recent years for over diagnosing malignancies—that is, finding a significant number of early cancers that would never cause harm if left untreated, leading to unnecessary treatment. Colon-cancer screening is less controversial.

"With colon cancer, it's not so much screening to find early cancers but screening to find polyps and remove them, which prevents cancer," said James Church, a colorectal cancer surgeon at the Cleveland Clinic, who wasn't involved in the new study.

The rate of colon cancers has risen about 1% a year in Americans under age 50, which some experts attribute to declining physical exercise and rising rates of obesity and diabetes.

"People with diabetes or prediabetes have a higher amount of circulating insulin, which stimulates tumor growth. It acts like Miracle-Gro for precancerous polyps in the colon," said Dr. Brawley.

African-Americans continue to have a 25% higher risk of colon cancer than whites, and a 50% higher risk than Asian-Americans, which experts attribute to both socio-economic factors and genetics.

Colon cancer is strongly hereditary. People with a close relative, or several distant relatives, with the disease are at much higher risk than the rest of the population. Experts recommend that people in this category begin screenings when they are 10 years younger than the youngest relative was at the time of diagnosis.

In general, experts recommend that starting at age 50, people undergo one of three forms of colon-cancer screening: a colonoscopy every 10 years; a test for blood in the stool every

year; or a sigmoidoscopy (a test of the upper gastrointestinal tract) every five years along with a stool test every three to five years.

Of the screening options, colonoscopy is the most popular, far outpacing the older stool tests in recent years. The percentage of Americans aged 50 to 75 who have had at least one colonoscopy jumped to 55% in 2010 from 19% in 2000.

A newer so-called virtual colonoscopy, using a CT scan instead of a fiber-optic camera, is noninvasive, requires no anesthesia and is even more sensitive than a colonoscopy. However, it still requires patients to empty their colons in advance, and if the CT scan discovers polyps, a colonoscopy is still needed to remove them.

The Affordable Care Act requires all insurance policies that began after September 2010 to cover the older colon-cancer screening tests with no out-of-pocket costs to patients. However, once polyps have been found, some health plans no longer consider subsequent screenings to be preventive and require a copay. Medicare follows similar rules.

As of now, Medicare doesn't cover virtual colonoscopies, while private insurance varies.

Despite the progress, some experts are frustrated that the screening rate for colon cancer isn't even higher. U.S. public-health officials are launching a new effort to bring 80% of Americans up-to-date by 2018.

Said Dr. Church of the Cleveland Clinic: "Every time a patient with colon cancer comes into my office, I think, 'This didn't need to happen. Why didn't this person get a colonoscopy five years ago?'"

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