

MARCH IS NATIONAL COLORECTAL CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

Regular checkups and screenings are essential to long-term health and wellness



If it's been a while since you've seen your doctor, it may be time for a visit. Routine checkups allow doctors to screen for digestive health issues and diseases that can become life-threatening if they go undiagnosed, like inflammatory bowel disease or colon cancer.

Routine Colonoscopy Leads to Early Detection of Colon Cancer for 58-Year-Old Houston Resident

Samuel Fuentes knew he was overdue for a colonoscopy, but he kept putting it off. After all, he felt fine. There was no history of colorectal cancer in his family. And a friend had told him getting a colonoscopy would be uncomfortable.

During a routine checkup last fall, his family medicine doctor urged him to get screened and referred him to Memorial Hermann Medical Group gastroenterologist Shaheryar Siddiqui, MD, who is affiliated with Memorial Hermann Southwest Hospital, for a colonoscopy. This time, Fuentes followed through.

Afterwards, he wondered why he had ever hesitated. "I don't know why I was afraid," he says. "You wake up, and it's already finished. There's nothing to be afraid of."

While performing the colonoscopy, Dr. Siddiqui found and removed a large growth, called a polyp, on the inner lining of Fuentes' colon, which was sent to a pathology lab for testing. The results showed that Fuentes had cancer.

"When Dr. Siddiqui told me what he found, I freaked out," says Fuentes, who has worked as a chef in a local country club for 23 years. "I told him, 'I'm 58 years

old. I'm starting to think about retiring someday. I have a family, kids and grandkids. I want to see them grow up.'"

"The worst part about this type of cancer," says Dr. Siddiqui, "is that often there are no symptoms, at least with early stage cancer. Patients often tell me, 'If I'm feeling fine, why would I think I have cancer?' And I tell them, you don't need to feel sick in order to have a malignancy. That's why cancer kills so many people."

Dr. Siddiqui referred Fuentes to colon and rectal surgeon Aakash Gajjar, MD, who is affiliated with Memorial Hermann Southwest Hospital and Memorial Hermann Sugar Land Hospital. Dr. Gajjar performed some additional tests and reviewed the results and the case with the hospital's tumor board, a group of specialists who meet regularly to discuss cancer cases. The board recommended surgery, to reduce the chance of the cancer spreading or recurring.

In December 2020, Dr. Gajjar performed a robotic sigmoid colectomy, a minimally invasive surgical procedure to remove the diseased part of Fuentes' colon. "By using the robot, we can spare the patient—in this case, Mr. Fuentes—an open surgery. Performing the surgery in a minimally invasive fashion yields smaller incisions, less pain, a shorter hospital stay, less risk of infection and a faster recovery and return to work."

The day after his surgery, Fuentes went home to recover. Less than a month later, he was back at work. He is very thankful for the care and support he received from his two doctors. And he's taking better care of himself, exercising and eating more healthfully—less cheese, barbeque and red meat and more chicken, seafood and fresh fruits and vegetables.

Talk to your doctor about which tests are right for you. To schedule an appointment, visit memorialhermann.org/mhmg.

**Due to recent changes in screening recommendations, please consult your insurance provider to confirm coverage if you are under age 50.*

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Did You Know? According to the American Cancer Society:

- Excluding skin cancers, colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer diagnosed in both men and women in the U.S.
- Colorectal cancer is the second most common cause of cancer deaths, expected to cause about 53,000 deaths in 2021.
- The lifetime risk for developing colorectal cancer is about 1 in 23 for men and about 1 in 25 for women.
- Although the overall death rate from colorectal cancer has dropped—likely due to increased screening and improved cancer treatments—deaths from colorectal cancer among people younger than 55 increased 1 percent per year from 2008 to 2017.

Schedule a Digestive Health Screening

The American Cancer Society recommends you begin regular colon cancer screening at age 45*, even earlier if you have a family history or symptoms. There are many screening tests for colon cancer, including at-home tests as well as procedures like colonoscopies, the gold standard in colon cancer screening.

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