

Resolve to get preventive cancer screenings in 2023

By Sheri Pope

The start of a new year is a time to put together a list of changes we would like to see. For many of us, the list of New Year's resolutions includes following a healthy diet plan, quitting tobacco and losing weight. In other words, we are developing an overall goal to be healthier this year.

One resolution that doesn't always make it to the list is to schedule cancer screenings. By staying up to date on screenings we can decrease the number of cancers diagnosed. Regular screening can detect changes that have not developed into cancer but could if left untreated. These screenings can also find cancer in early stages, leading to a better chance of full recovery. Early diagnosis might also allow treatment to be less invasive, lengthy and costly.

According to data collected by the American College of Radiology, the total number of cancers diagnosed has decreased by as much as 50% since the pandemic began. Clearly this is another way COVID-19 has impacted our lives. During the pandemic, the number of preventive screenings decreased dramatically. Most medical appointments that were not a necessity were postponed. Lars J. Grimm, MD, a professor at Duke University Medical Center, says this could lead to a rise in future cancer diagnoses, late-stage diagnoses and worse outcomes.

Here is the good news. A new initiative called Return to Screening has been created by the American College of Surgeons in partnership with the American Cancer Society. They have developed a broad range of strategies to increase screenings, including targeted outreach for a certain types of cancer screening. The initiative aims to provide assistance with cost and convenience, like covering the cost of travel or extended hours of service.

Other groups are focusing on specific populations, including women 80 and older and Asian women, who had especially low screening numbers during the pandemic. Populations who live in underserved and underpopulated areas also need support to increase screening numbers. While there is still a lot of work to be done, some clinics are reaching pre-pandemic screening volumes with the work of Return to Screening.

While planning your resolutions this year consider the preventive screenings that are available and recommended:

- Lung cancer screening for smokers with a 20-pack-a-year habit or who have quit in the last 15 years.
- Colorectal cancer screening, recommended by the American Cancer Society to begin at age 45.
- Cervical cancer screening for women starting at age 21 and breast screenings at 40 to 55, depending on family history and other risk factors.
- Breast cancer screenings for women starting at age 40 to 55, depending on family history and other risk factors.

- Prostate cancer conversations between men and their healthcare providers should start at age 50. For African-American men, the conversations should start at age 45.

It is never too early to discuss cancer screenings with your medical provider. Ask which screenings are right for you and when. Let's make 2023 the year we follow through with our resolutions for a safer and healthier lifestyle.

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