

Big Birthdays...The importance of screening tests

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Big birthdays, those that end with a zero, make you think about things you usually ignore: Insurance, sports cars, gray hairs in odd places, and screening tests.

I just had one of those birthdays which made my personal physician quip, “Well, this is the last time you’ll get away without a prostate exam!” Thanks, Bill. Way to rub it in.

All kidding aside, as a doctor who specializes in women’s cancers, screening tests occupy a large part of what I do. I’d much rather treat a small precancerous lesion of the cervix or vulva than perform hours of surgery, possibly followed by radiation and chemotherapy, for something my patient thought would “go away” on its own.

I am even happier when someone comes in for vaccination, the primary prevention of cancer before it arises. In my work, the introduction of the HPV vaccine Gardasil has given me hope that I’ll be one of the last Gynecologic Oncologists who know how to do that radical surgery for cervical cancer in 30 years. If the vaccination is given before sexual debut (which seems to have gotten very young) it is nearly 100% effective at preventing the two most common viral causes of cervical cancer.

Secondary prevention is also pretty groovy (is that what the kids are saying these days?). Annual mammograms detect early breast cancer, improving a surgeon’s ability to remove the cancer before metastasis. Papanicolaou smears and the high-risk HPV viral testing have made detection of cervical precancer routine so that invasive cancer is unusual. There is no age that is too old for this kind of screening, so don’t stop going to your gynecologist just because you have gotten tired of it.

And don’t get me started about colonoscopy. I have spent 15 years trying to get my parents to get this done. Just one colonoscopy after age 50 can reduce the risk of dying from colon cancer by fifty percent. Finally, my dad’s doctor talks him into colonoscopy, which finds (drum roll, please) early colon cancer. Excised in a laparoscopic procedure by Bob Noone, MD at Lankenau Hospital; home the next day.

That aged me quickly. Then I gloated about being right, but no matter how old I get or how many degrees I achieve, I will always just be their little boy.

Colon cancer can also be detected by barium enema, annual stool testing, and

sigmoidoscopy. Nifty “virtual” colonoscopies are not yet FDA approved, and you still need laxatives before and gas to “blow up” the organ just like real colonoscopies.

“But doc, can’t you test for ovarian cancer?” The short answer is no, since looking at the ovaries requires major surgery and ovarian cancer is relatively rare. Routine screening with ultrasounds leads to the removal of dozens of normal ovaries before one early ovarian cancer is found. Serum blood studies have potential, but always look more promising in the research setting and then fall short in the general population. Researchers are now looking at panels of many blood tests.

So listen to a doctor who will be joining you in prevention. Keep going to your primary care physician and your gynecologist. Treat diseases before they occur. Listen to your children who become doctors (right, Dad?).