



# Colonoscopy Helps Man Catch Colon Cancer Early

David St. John, 60, of Menomonee Falls never expected he would use a free clinic for his healthcare needs. Ten years ago, he had a thriving career as a computer programming analyst and didn't worry about health insurance. But when the "dot-com bubble" burst in 2001, David's career ended, and he was forced into jobs that offered little or no health insurance.

All he could afford was a high-deductible plan, which he intended to use only for emergencies. In 2007, David started coming to the Community Outreach Health Clinic at Community Memorial Hospital. The clinic offers free healthcare services for people who are uninsured or underinsured. David visited the clinic for blood pressure screenings and general health maintenance.

## A Free Screening Saves a Life

When Linda Smith, MSN, APNP, nurse practitioner and Community Outreach Health Clinic coordinator, told David the clinic offered free colonoscopies through a generous donation to Community Memorial Foundation from the Bobbie Nick Voss Charitable Funds, he jumped at

the opportunity. "I had never had a colonoscopy before, and knew I was past due for one," he said. "But I had no idea how much a colonoscopy would cost. Even with my insurance, there was no way I could afford it. So a free colonoscopy was a great opportunity."

A colonoscopy is the primary screening tool for colorectal cancer (colon cancer and cancer of the rectum). It is an examination of the large colon that involves inserting a small camera through the anus, into the rectum and into the colon. During this examination, a physician can find and remove polyps (abnormal growths) in the large intestine.

Colon polyps occur in 15 percent to 20 percent of the adult population. It's believed that almost every colon cancer begins as a small non-cancerous polyp. While most are benign, some are cancerous or pre-cancerous (abnormal, rapidly dividing cells that appear suspicious) and must be removed immediately. But benign colon polyps may also turn into colon cancer over time.

David Staff, MD, a gastroenterologist on staff at Community Memorial Hospital, performed David's colonoscopy. During the procedure, he removed numerous polyps, but there was one that could not be removed —

it was cancerous. "Because I could not remove the polyp during the colonoscopy, he needed to be referred for surgery to remove that part of the colon," Dr. Staff said.

Smith said she was floored when she heard about David's diagnosis. "Many of the people we send for a free colonoscopy already have serious symptoms that could be colorectal cancer," Smith said. "He was simply the right age for a screening. We never expected anything to turn up."

During the time between the colonoscopy and removal of part of his colon, David was quite nervous. "It could be something that surgery would easily correct, or it could be the end of my life," he said.

Karl Bertram, MD, a general surgeon on staff at Community Memorial, performed the surgery on April 30. After the surgery, David learned that he had stage I colon cancer, which meant it had not spread to other organs. Dr. Bertram was able to completely remove the cancer. "It turned out to be an annoyance rather than a tragedy," David said.

## Caught in Time

Because the cancer was confined to the colon, David did not need chemotherapy or radiation therapy. He spent six days in the hospital and recovered at home for six weeks before returning to his job in June. David will see Dr. Staff next year for a follow-up colonoscopy.

"This case illustrates just how important it is to have regular colonoscopies after the age of 50," Dr. Staff said. "Mr. St. John had no symptoms, yet he had a cancerous polyp in his colon. We were fortunate that we were able to remove the polyp before the cancer spread. Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer among Americans, but it's very treatable — if we catch it in time."

While colorectal cancer usually produces no symptoms in its early stages, the most likely warning signs in later stages include:

- Changes in bowel movements (persistent constipation or diarrhea, feeling like you can't empty your bowel completely, narrowing stools)
- Blood in your stool
- Abdominal discomfort
- Unexplained fatigue and/or anemia
- Unexplained weight loss

Smith said doctors have found pre-cancerous polyps in many people who received free colonoscopies at the Community Outreach Health Clinic. "Who knows what would be down the road for these individuals if they hadn't had these colonoscopies," she said. "We are grateful to donors like the Bobbie Nick Voss Charitable Funds that make these screenings possible. Their gift is saving lives."

The Community Outreach Health Clinic schedules appointments on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5:00 to 8:00 pm and Mondays from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. The Clinic is always looking for clerical and clinical volunteers. To inquire about the colonoscopy program or to volunteer, call 262-257-3393.

## Reduce Your Risk

*Here's how you can reduce your risk for colorectal cancer:*

- Eat less fat and more fruits, vegetables and fiber
- Exercise regularly
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Stop using tobacco of any type
- Limit alcohol consumption
- Follow the recommended guidelines for screening

The American Cancer Society offers the following guidelines for colorectal cancer screening options, which should begin at age 50:

- Colonoscopy every 10 years
- Virtual colonoscopy (CT colonography) every five years
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years
- Double-contrast barium enema every five years
- Annual fecal occult blood testing
- Stool DNA testing (there are no guidelines for how often this test should be performed)

People who have a family history of colorectal cancer should talk to their doctor about earlier, more frequent screening.

## Free Mammograms Also Offered

For the past two years, Community Memorial Hospital has offered free mammograms to screen uninsured women for breast cancer, thanks to a grant from the Milwaukee Affiliate of Susan G. Komen for the Cure. For more information on eligibility, call 262-257-3393.