

TOP FIVE STRATEGIES FOR MAKING “EARLY DETECTION” MANTRA A REALITY IN AMERICANS’ FIGHT AGAINST CANCER

Pathology expert discusses good news on cancer front; how patients can slash mortality risks

The recent announcement from the American Cancer Society that cancer mortality rates have fallen slightly for the second straight year – due in large part to early detection of the disease – has encouraged Americans to commit to catching cancer at its earliest, most treatable stage. Yet, many are left wondering exactly what “early detection” entails, and what the patient’s role is in the process.

“Early detection is a mantra that the medical community has been stressing for decades, and we are now beginning to reap the benefits of that effort,” notes Dr. George Hollenberg, MD, a leading pathology expert and founder of Acupath Laboratories in New York. “However, the mortality reductions we’re seeing are still quite small,” Dr. Hollenberg adds. The American Cancer Society report notes that in 2004 – the most recent year for which data is available – there were 3,014 fewer cancer deaths than during the previous year. This represents a 0.5% drop from 2003, when cancer mortality also dropped, but by an even smaller number of several hundred. Prior to 2003, cancer mortality had been rising steadily in America for more than 70 years.

How important has early detection been in the reduction of cancer mortality? According to the ACS report, for example, only 26% of women diagnosed with late stage metastatic breast cancer survived five years. Yet, when the cancer was caught at the invasive stage, five-year survival jumped to 88%, and, among women diagnosed with localized breast cancer that had not spread, 98% met the five-year survival goal. “In order to continue in this right direction, we need to provide all Americans with very realistic, actionable ways they can achieve the ‘early detection’ standard being advocated,” Dr. Hollenberg advises.

Patients as their own advocates

Dr. Hollenberg believes the key to successful early cancer detection involves another common medical mantra: patients should take charge of their own healthcare. “The two go hand-in-hand, actually, as those patients who are most involved and proactive with their health are most likely to receive preventive care as well as early diagnoses of a host of illnesses and conditions,” Dr. Hollenberg explains.

Following are five key strategies Dr. Hollenberg believes will help patients become their best health advocates, and strengthen their chances of survival through early detection of cancer and other illnesses:

- 1. What’s your risk?** One area in which cancer research has kept a brisk pace is risk factor identification and management. Today, your physician can determine if you are at a high, average or low risk of developing certain cancers based on genetics, racial background and lifestyle factors. “Knowing your family history and being honest about your lifestyle and behaviors will help your doctor gauge your risk for a spectrum of different cancers,” Dr. Hollenberg confirms.

2. **Talk openly with your physician** about cancer screening. “It’s human nature to avoid certain conversations, as though avoiding the subject might prevent the condition,” Dr. Hollenberg notes. “Patients are sometimes reticent to discuss age-related, financial and insurance issues as well.” Yet doctors are well-versed in available screening programs in their area, from age-related and high-risk screenings to special programs for the uninsured and underinsured.
3. **See something? Feel something? Say something!** “Early detection happens when patients recognize something abnormal and immediately arrange to have it evaluated by a physician,” Dr. Hollenberg stresses. “While ‘watchful waiting’ is certainly an appropriate course of action in some circumstances, it should be initiated by a physician after conducting a thorough medical examination,” Dr. Hollenberg adds. He also urges patients to encourage family members and friends to see the doctor when concerns arise.
4. **Get a second opinion** if a diagnosis or recommendation of watchful waiting causes concern. “Physicians today collaborate with many other medical professionals across a spectrum of specialties in order to ensure the best patient care,” Dr. Hollenberg points out. “In the spirit of taking charge of their own healthcare, patients should not hesitate to trust their own instincts in doing the same.”
5. **Ask about testing** that is available to diagnose or rule out countless types of cancer and other illnesses. “In addition to advances in risk factor identification, medicine has made great strides in the area of pathology in recent years,” Dr. Hollenberg notes. From specialized biopsies and scans to highly-accurate molecular blood and urine analyses, many conditions can be confirmed or ruled out with uninvase or minimally invasive procedures.

About Dr. George Hollenberg

Dr. George Hollenberg, M.D. is an authority in the fields of pathology, clinical pathology and dermatopathology with expertise in the areas of dysplastic nevi, melanoma, prostate and gastrointestinal cancer. Board-certified in Pathology and Dermatopathology, Dr. Hollenberg is a Fellow of the College of American Pathologists, The American Society of Dermatopathology and the AMA. He has published articles on skin, prostate and gastrointestinal cancer, and is the Consultant in Dermatopathology to The North Shore University Hospital Center. As the founding director of Acupath Laboratories, Inc., Dr. Hollenberg supervises the analysis of tens of thousands of biopsies per year, using the latest cutting-edge technology in histology and immunocytochemistry, as well as the latest advances in computerized report preparation.