

This is the eleventh newsletter in a series of ONCORG Community Conversations. They're focused on relationships between doctors and patients, and the complexity of treating cancer.

June 2026 late Edition – Why early Screening Matters



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Early cancer screening is vital because it detects malignancies before symptoms appear, when tumors are small, localized, and easiest to treat. This drastically improves survival rates, allows for less aggressive treatments, and can even stop pre-cancers from developing into fully invasive cancers. Think about what this means to your quality of life and your survivorship journey.

Cancerous tumors usually start as a microscopic cluster of abnormal cells and grow larger over time. As they multiply, they create a mass that steadily enlarges and can affect surrounding healthy tissues.

The progression of tumor growth generally follows these phases:

- **Microscopic Growth:** Cancer begins when a single cell mutates and starts multiplying out of control. At this tiny stage, it gets its necessary nutrients and oxygen directly from nearby healthy blood vessels. Yes, all cells need nutrition to grow, regardless of if it's good cells or bad cells.
- **Tumor Formation:** Continued division creates a mass (tumor) made up of millions of cells. As the tumor outgrows its initial blood supply, it sends out chemical signals that force the body to grow new blood vessels to sustain the cancer's growth.
- **Progression and Spread:** As the tumor gets larger, the cancer cells can break through surrounding tissue boundaries and enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system. This allows the cancer to spread to distant parts of the body, which is known as metastasis.

And this brings us to the primary reasons early cancer screening is vital to protecting your body from unwanted danger. There are several reasons why early screening is important:

- **Higher Survival Rates:** Catching cancer early—before it spreads to distant parts of the body—significantly increases the likelihood of a cure or long-term remission.

For example, the 5-year survival rate for localized breast cancer is 99%, but drops significantly if the cancer spreads.

- **Removal of Pre-Cancers:** Screenings don't just find cancer; they also identify pre-cancerous growths (such as polyps during a colonoscopy) that can be safely removed before they ever turn malignant.
- **Less Aggressive Treatments:** Smaller tumors often require less intensive therapies. Early detection can spare patients from more extreme or invasive surgical, radiation, or chemotherapy treatments. I'm a perfect example ten years ago, when a large mass was removed surgically before it spread to the lymph nodes.
- **Cost and Recovery:** Treating cancer in its localized stages is usually much more manageable, resulting in a higher quality of life, shorter recovery times, and reduced overall healthcare costs, and your out-of-pocket costs.

Examples of early detection tools include:

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most diagnosed cancer in women and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the U.S. Early detection through screening can significantly improve outcomes. In fact, the survival rate for a stage I breast cancer diagnosis is >99%. That's a huge number

The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) recommends monthly self-exams and clinical breast exams every 1-3 years for women in their 20s and 30s. For those at average risk, mammograms (an X-ray imaging test performed by a healthcare provider) are suggested every two years from ages 40-74, with annual screenings advised for women 45-54. After 55 years, individuals can choose annual or biennial mammograms based on medical guidance.

A colleague of mine recently shared some of the advantages of 3D Mammogram versus 2D Mammogram, and I thought I'd share some of the differences:

Key Differences at a Glance:

Features	2D Mammogram	3D Mammogram
How it Works	Takes flat images from 2 angles (top and side).	Takes multiple images in an arc, assembled into 1mm cross-sections.
Best For	Routine, baseline screenings.	Dense breast tissue, high-risk patients, or implants.
Accuracy	Misses more tumors hidden by overlying tissue.	Detects 20% - 40% more invasive cancers.

Callbacks	Higher rate of false positives and return visits.	Fewer "false alarms" and callback appointments.
Radiation	Slightly lower radiation dose.	Slightly higher radiation (though both are safe).
Cost & Coverage	Often 100% covered by insurance under the ACA.	May incur an out-of-pocket surcharge or require specific plan coverage.

This is a personal choice you should discuss with your doctor.

Colorectal Cancer

Colonoscopy screening should start at 45 – so don't put it off! If polyps are identified during a colonoscopy, they can be removed immediately. Colonoscopy screening should be done once every 10 years for average risk adults. There are also several non-invasive alternatives – these include stool DNA tests (e.g., Cologuard) and Fecal Immunochemical Testing (FIT), both of which can be done at home. These types of tests involve taking an at-homestool sample (yes, we're talking about poop), and then mailing the sample back to a lab for processing. It is recommended that a stool DNA test should be repeated every 3 years, while a FIT test should be done annually. Recent trends have shown that there is a higher incidence of colorectal cancer in patients under the age of 50. The best way for us to combat this trend is to be proactive and vigilant about getting screened! Make sure to talk to your doctor to understand what the best options for you are.

Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer screening is key to early detection and prevention. Both pap-smear tests and HPV tests are approved for screening, performed at a healthcare provider's office and will involve having a sample taken directly from the cervix. A Pap test detects abnormal cells, while an HPV test identifies high-risk virus strains that are linked to cervical cancer. Guidelines recommend a Pap test every three years for women 21-29, and for those 30-65, an HPV test every five years, co-testing every five years, or a Pap test every three years. One of the major causes of cervical cancer is HPV infection. As such, in addition to getting screened regularly, HPV vaccination is an important tool for preventing cervical cancer.

Prostate Cancer

Prostate cancer is the most commonly occurring cancer in men, affecting about 1 in 9 men in their lifetime. The primary screening tests for prostate cancer are the prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test. A PSA test is a simple blood test performed by a doctor. Screening is generally recommended for men 55 and older, with high-risk individuals starting earlier.

Lung Cancer

While lung cancer screening is not recommended for the general population, it is an important screening tool for individuals who are smokers or have a significant history of smoking. It goes without saying, smoking cessation is an important part of lung cancer prevention. However, the next best thing to do for individuals who smoke (or have smoked) is to be proactive about their lung cancer screening. Lung cancer screening is done through a low-dose lung CT (computed tomography). A low-dose lung CT is an imaging test that uses a small dose of radiation to detect abnormal nodules in the lungs. Screening is advised for adults with a significant history of smoking, and early detection can greatly improve treatment outcomes. If you are a smoker or have a greater than 20 pack-year smoking history, talk to your doctor about getting your lung cancer screening done regularly.

Taking care of your health starts with small but important steps—like staying up to date with cancer screenings. Staying on top of your screenings isn't just another task on your to-do list; it's a powerful way to protect your health and your future. Don't wait for symptoms. Don't put it off. Talk to your doctor, make that appointment. The best time to act is now—because early detection gives you the best chance to fight, to heal, and to live.

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