Ask an expert: Am I being too concerned about colon cancer?

Q. Please tell me if I am over-reacting. I'm 54, healthy and get regular medical attention, but no colon cancer screening except for a blood test my doctor does when checking my prostate. I have had a change in bowel habits last few months: alternating constipation followed by diarrhoea and maroon/dark stools.

I have a family history of colon cancer (mom got it at 57 and sister at 53 - both cured). My doc told me to take a fiber supplement and I asked about colonoscopy. My doctor said most of the docs in the office didn't even get one. I mentioned it again at a recent office visit and she sort of shrugged the question off.

Am I being obsessive if I just call and get one?

A. You are not being obsessive or overly concerned. You should be proud of the fact that you are taking your health matters into your own hands.

Recommendations for normal-risk individuals

National recommendations advise beginning screening at age 50 in a normal risk individual for colon cancer. Screening with occult blood testing is considered acceptable if it also includes a flexible sigmoidoscopy starting at age 50. However, by today's standards this is considered inferior to screening with colonoscopy.

The gold standard for colon cancer screening is to have a colonoscopy starting at age 50 and one every 10 years if it is normal, have no symptoms, and no other family history that changes your risk status. Colonoscopy is considered so important to screening and prevention, that last year Medicare eliminated the deductible for all of its enrollees who receive a colonoscopy.

Recommendations for high-risk individuals

Now you ARE NOT an average risk individual. The fact that you have two first degree relatives with colon cancer (sister and mother) put you into a high risk category. National organizations advise that individuals with a first degree relative begin screening at age 40 with a colonoscopy.

Know your family history and get screened accordingly

Your family history, your changes in bowel character and color, mandate a colonoscopy immediately. In fact, your family history specifically raises the issue of inherited colon cancer and polyposis - something referred to as HNPCC (Hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer). This gene defect runs in families and even without genetic testing, at risk individuals can be identified using several established clinical criteria including individuals who have two or more first degree relatives with colon cancer, in at least two generations, and one with colon cancer around the age of 50.

You and all of your siblings age 40 should have a colonoscopy, and in fact the normal surveillance for you changes to every 5 years if it is normal.
Do not wait and do not waste time seeking other advice. Seek out a gastroenterologist or a colorectal surgeon and get a colonoscopy immediately.