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Danbury Hospital makes colonoscopies easier

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DANBURY -- Anyone who has ever had a **colonoscopy** knows this to be true: The procedure itself is a piece of cake. It's the cleansing process the day before that wears you out. "One of the biggest complaints we hear is about the prep," Dr. Joseph Fiorito, chief of gastroenterology at Danbury Hospital said Thursday. "It's probably the biggest deterrent to colorectal screening."

"We want to be a colon cancer-free area," said Frank Kelly, the hospital's president and chief executive officer. "So it's important for us to find any barriers to getting screening."

Danbury Hospital is now pioneering a different approach to the "run a dozen times to the toilet" drill that normally accompanies a **colonoscopy**. Called hydrotherapy, it involves a gentle, thorough flush of the large intestine done in the hospital 45 minutes before the **colonoscopy**.

Danbury Hospital is the first hospital in the state to offer hydrotherapy. Fiorito said since adopting the technology, the hospital has found patients much prefer it to the old way.

"We have one machine here," said Fiorito, speaking at the new Medical Arts building, which contains the hospital's endoscopy suites. "We have another at the hospital. We're ordering a third, and I believe that won't be the last."

Colonoscopies are the most important tool doctors have to prevent colon cancer -- the third-leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S. With the screening test, doctors are able to examine the entire colon. If they find a polyp -- or small growth-- inside, they can remove it

during the procedure.

"All colon cancers start as polyps," Fiorito said. "If you remove the polyp, you remove the potential for cancer. We could prevent 100 percent of colon cancers. I believe that."

Because of a big public education effort over the past decade -- one that sought to teach both patients and family doctors about colorectal cancer and how to prevent it -- Fiorito said the city has seen an increase in the number of people getting colonoscopies and a reduction in colon cancer.

"We're finding colon cancers early and saving lives," he said.

The problem is that patients have to clean out their colons for the screening to succeed. That can involve drinking cup after cup of a diarrhea-inducing solution -- the most familiar one is marketed as Colyte. Or it can mean a three-step bowel cleansing preparation.

In either case, Fiorito said, patients must spend a day at home -- before the day of the test -- while the prep kit does its work. It also means a lot of discomfort.

For elderly patients with cardiac or kidney problems, it can mean stress on systems that don't need that stress. Often, Fiorito said, it means people just decide to skip the whole thing.

Fiorito said he heard about hydrotherapy from a patient who had a colonic cleansing at a West Coast spa. While opposed to the procedure for nonmedical reasons, Fiorito said he realized it might help people who need a **colonoscopy**.

With hydrotherapy, Fiorito said, patients stay on a liquid diet and take a mild laxative the day before the **colonoscopy**. They go to the hospital early to have their bowels cleaned with an infusion of warm filtered water, a procedure supervised by a therapist.

"In the most basic sense, it's a high-colonic enema," Fiorito said.

Fiorito did a comparative study, offering 50 patients Colyte, 50 patients phospho-soda, and 50 hydrotherapy. Overwhelmingly, he said, the patients favored hydrotherapy. The hospital is now offering it as an alternative for all **colonoscopy** patients.

"It's more comfortable, it's more convenient, and it saves patients money," he said. "They don't have to take an extra day off."

Contact Robert Miller