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More screening and early detection needed to overcome colon cancer, ICA says

• By JUDY SIEGEL

A month-long campaign in March to bring down the rates of colorectal cancer is being launched Tuesday by the Israel Cancer Association (ICA) along with its counterparts around the world.

Malignant colorectal tumors are preventable, and when caught as precancerous polyps, growths can be safely removed. While screening and early detection have significantly increased in the last few years due to ICA efforts, the tumor is still diagnosed annually in 3,400 Israelis – especially those over the age of 50 – and kills 1,240.

More than a third of Israelis in the population targeted for screening have undergone simple tests to detect blood in the stools, a possible sign of malignancy, but fewer have had an invasive colonoscopy to examine the rectum and colon with an endoscope looking for tumors or precancerous polyps, said Prof. Gad Rennert, director of the national program for early detection of colorectal cancer.

Colonoscopies for the target population are included in the basket of health services.

ICA director-general Miri Ziv said at a Monday press conference that International Agency for Research on Cancer of the World Health Organization nevertheless ranks Israel as one of the countries where the prevalence of colorectal cancer is high, partly due to genetic reasons.

A new discovery that is currently being reviewed by geneticists, epidemiologists

and oncologists is a genetic mutation that puts Jews of North African origin at high risk of colon cancer. Rennert said that carriers who inherited the mutation from both parents are at almost 100 percent risk of contracting the malignancy at some times in their lives. As a result of the finding, a test for the gene is recommended by the researchers for all Jews of North African descent over the age of 50 who have a family history of colorectal cancer.

Among the latest retrospective foreign studies on colorectal cancer are those (published in the *British Medical Journal*) that show a connection between it and low levels of vitamin D in the blood. Thus people at risk are urged to go to their doctor to ask about vitamin D supplementation.

Others have linked the frequent drinking of coffee with a lower risk of the tumor, however, researchers have said that it may not involve a causative effect, as people suffering from inflammatory bowel disease that raises the cancer risk drink less coffee than the norm because it makes them feel ill.

Taking low-dose aspirin for years has been shown by German scientists to reduce the risk of colorectal cancer, but the commonly used drug can also raise the risk of hemorrhage in the digestive system. However, studies show that taking such aspirin does not create false positive results in screening for blood in the stools. Doctors should be consulted about this, and patients should not take aspirin without consultation.