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Pre-colonoscopy 'isn't that bad'

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By Kim Carpenter / World-Herald staff writer

Content sponsored by the Great Plains Colon Cancer Task Force.

It's no fun, as most people who've had a colonoscopy will be only too glad to tell you. No, not the procedure. The prep that precedes it. There are jokes, complaints and yes, even horror stories.

But all of that aside, the inconvenience of the prep is a small price to pay for what you get in return: One of the best colon cancer preventions available.

The purpose of a colonoscopy bowel preparation is to empty the large intestine so a camera on the end a scope can have a clear view of any polyps or small growths that one day could lead to cancer. (If any polyps are discovered, they're typically removed on the spot.)

Experts advise that a properly executed prep is critical for a successful colonoscopy.

"The goal of the prep is to clean out the colon," said Dr. Helen Fasanya-Uptagraft of Midwest Gastrointestinal Associates. "The key is to literally flush it out."

The basic way to do this is by drinking several liters of prescribed fluid that eliminate stool from the colon.

"Patients typically take around eight ounces every 15 minutes or so, but it varies," said Dr. Josh Evans, also of Midwest Gastrointestinal Associates and president of the Great Plains Colon Cancer Task Force.

Standard preps are typically powders patients mix with water or a ready-made solution. The amount ranges anywhere from two to four liters — almost a gallon. The prep is most often divided and performed both the evening before and the morning of the procedure.

"If a scope is scheduled for midmorning or after that, and it has been more than eight hours, bile comes down from the liver and starts entering the colon again," explained Dr. Alan Thorson of Colon and Rectal Surgery Inc., The Colonoscopy Center. "That starts to take away some of the visibility. Splitting the prep can flush everything out and make sure that the colon is as clean as it can be."

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Fasting is a key component of clearing out the colon. Beginning the morning of the prep, patients are limited to clear liquids such as chicken broth and apple juice.

During the week before the procedure, patients are told to avoid high-fiber foods as well as nuts, seeds, granola, fruits and vegetables with skins or seeds. “This helps facilitate the clean-out process,” said Fasanya-Uptagraft. “We also tell patients to avoid red or purple liquids during their clear-liquid fast the day before the procedure, as those colors can look like blood in the colon.”

Numerous preps are available. The most common are electrolyte or osmotic types, such as GoLYTELY and Colyte, which are PEG (polyethylene glycol) preps.

“They’re very good at flushing the colon without affecting electrolytes or fluid balance,” said Thorson. “Unfortunately, they’re also the ones that people seem to dislike the most because they have to drink so much of the prescribed fluid.”

For people who have difficulty consuming large quantities of liquid, lower volume alternatives make it easier. These include the PEG-based MoviPrep, Suclear (a PEG sodium sulfate), and Suprep and Prepopik, which use saline laxatives and include magnesium-containing laxatives.

“The volume of the laxative you have to drink is small,” said Thorson. “Most of the fluid comes from choices you can make from a list of clear fluids.”

These kinds of bowel preps, however, can affect hydration and electrolyte balance more than the first kind, so doctors avoid them for patients with kidney or heart disease.

“The newer lower volume preps are not appropriate for every patient,” Evans said.

The taste of preps ranges from salty to sweet, depending on the brand.

“Some patients say, ‘That wasn’t so bad! Other patients hate it,” said Evans.

Fortunatey, there are a lot of options.

“We have enough choices that some people hate one prep, and other people like it. If you had a prep you didn’t like, make sure you mention it,” said Thorson. “There’s always an alternative.”

Fasanya-Uptagraf’s tips for making the prep more palatable:

- Add flavor with Crystal Light, lemon juice or any other drink powder as long as it’s not an intense red color.

- Put the prep on ice and sip it through a straw from a container with a cap. This can help overcome the psychological aversion some people develop to the prep. The capped cup ensures you don’t see or smell the prep.

- Drink lots of clear fluids during a colonoscopy prep.

“They all work best if you start out well-hydrated and have plenty of fluid in your intestines,” said Thorson.

People who don’t like to drink a lot are instructed to stagger the fluids throughout the day before beginning the prep.

“Start drinking more fluids first thing in the morning. Once you get to the prescribed bowel prep, you will still have to drink the fluids that go with it, but it will do a better job.”

In the end, all three physicians agreed that the majority of bowel prep horror stories are highly exaggerated.

“I think the anticipation of the prep is actually worse than it is,” Evans said. “Most patients tell me the hardest part of the colonoscopy isn’t the colonoscopy itself. It’s not even the day

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before and drinking the bowel preparation. The worst part is the fasting."

Thorson concurred. "By far the majority of people say, 'That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.'"

And certainly, they're not as bad as being diagnosed with colon cancer.

"It's unfortunate to have to inform someone that their colonoscopy needs to be repeated because the quality of the bowel preparation was poor," said Evans. "If there is stool coating the lining of the colon when I do the colonoscopy, then there's a significant chance of missing small or especially flat polyps, which are the precancerous growths we're trying to remove to prevent colon cancer."

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