

Health Unit Media Release



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The Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) - Does it really screen for colorectal cancer?

Currently the Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit is working with Cancer Care Ontario to promote colorectal screening for adults age 50 and older. The screening test recommended is a Fecal Occult Blood Test, which should be done every one to two years. Recently in the media, there has been a discussion about the effectiveness of the FOBT in detecting colorectal cancer. A report from CBS News on January 18, 2005 reported that the digital FOBT performed in the doctor's office detected possibly cancerous growths in the colon only five percent of the time. Although this screening test is a FOBT, it should not be confused with the at-home FOBT recommended for adults age 50 and older. For this test, stool samples are collected for three days rather than the one-time sample in the doctor's office. Health Canada recommends that every adult 50 years of age and older should have a FOBT every one to two years.

The at-home FOBT is not a perfect screening test. Cancer can be missed or the test can come back positive when cancer or polyps are not present. Although this is true, this screening tool has been shown to decrease the death rate from colorectal cancer by 16 percent. FOBT is also a simple test with low costs. This is important to consider in a publicly funded health care system where each person has the right to equal health care.

Other screening tools for colorectal cancer such as colonoscopy and sigmoidoscopy are more accurate yet would require many financial and physical resources to screen every adult age 50 and older.

The Health Unit encourages any adult age 50 and older to talk to his or her family doctor or nurse practitioner about colorectal cancer screening. A doctor or nurse practitioner can help adults decide which screening tool is best for them.

Call the Health Action Line at 1-800-660-5853 or 345-5685 or visit our website at www.healthunit.org.

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