

Overuse of Colonoscopy?

Nearly half of Medicare patients with negative screening colonoscopies had repeat exams within 7 years.

Screening for colorectal cancer probably is underused in some populations and might be overused in others, particularly in older people. Researchers used a Medicare database to identify about 24,000 patients (age, ≥ 66) who had negative screening colonoscopies between 2001 and 2003. Colonoscopies that involved biopsy or fulguration were excluded.

Rates of repeat colonoscopy at 5 and 7 years were 25% and 46%, respectively. Further assessment of these patients showed that slightly more than half had received new diagnoses that might have justified colonoscopy. The authors noted distinct inflection points in the cumulative rate of repeat colonoscopy at 3 and 5 years, which suggest that follow-up procedures were scheduled. Of patients who were 80 or older at initial negative screening, 33% underwent repeat screening within 7 years.

Comment: The rate of inappropriately early repeat colonoscopy probably is underestimated in this study — all guidelines and professional organizations recommend a 10-year interval between a negative exam and repeat screening, and follow-up in this study ended at 7 years. As is true for many screening or preventive services, some patients who least need repeat colonoscopy receive it, whereas many others who most need it do not. That one third of patients 80 or older with negative initial colonoscopy results had repeat procedures within 7 years is particularly worrisome, because no guidelines recommend screening after age 85.

— [Thomas L. Schwenk, MD](#)

Published in [Journal Watch General Medicine](#) May 24, 2011