

Cancer caught early with colonoscopies

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Medicare's extension of coverage for colonoscopies led to a significant increase in the number of cancers caught early, a U.S. study finds.

Researchers at the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program and Yale Medical School report the decision to extend coverage beyond high-risk groups lead to an increase in the number of procedures performed annually per 100,000 population, from 285 in 1992 to 1,919 from 2001, onward.

In a study published in the Dec. 20 edition of the Journal of the American Medical Association, the researchers report the increased screenings led to a significant increase in the number of early-stage cancers found on the right side of the colon, but no comparable increase in the number of cancers found on the left side or in more distal parts, the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times reported.

The study compared patients in HMOs to those with Medicare fee-for-service coverage. Similar results did not materialize in the HMO population, leading researchers to believe the difference was Medicare's decision to cover the procedure.

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