

African-American Women Bear Unequal Burden Of Colorectal Cancer

(NAPSA)—Cancer survivor Verna Cox knows firsthand that colorectal cancer (CRC) discriminates. At the age of 49, Cox never suspected that a series of tests for stomach pain and discomfort would result in a stage III colon cancer diagnosis. Like so many other African-American women today, Verna was completely unaware that her race and gender put her at greatest risk for the disease.

“I thought I was too young and healthy to get something like colon cancer,” said Cox, a retired cosmetics district sales manager from Philadelphia. “I had no idea that being an African-American woman increased my risk. Even worse, I didn’t find out that I had a family history of colorectal cancer until I told everyone in my family about my diagnosis. Cancer wasn’t something our family talked openly about.”

The statistics are alarming. African-American women have a 17.5 percent higher rate of CRC than Caucasian women and a 40 percent higher risk of dying from the disease. Yet, according to a recent Harris Interactive poll, 96 percent of African-American women over the age of 45 do not consider themselves to be at high risk for CRC. This misperception has led to deadly inaction, with 70 percent of African-American women over 45 not getting screened for the disease. More than a year after the American College of Gastroenterology issued updated guidelines for African Americans to begin earlier screenings at age 45, it seems that African-American women have not gotten the message.

In response to this significant health threat, the Black Women’s Health Imperative (The Imperative) and the National Women’s Health Resource Center (NWHRC) have joined forces to launch the African American Women Dare to Be Aware educational initiative. Designed to uniquely address the needs of African-American women, Dare to Be Aware confronts the issues pre-



venting African-American women from getting screened and seeking treatment by daring them to recognize their heightened risk and take action.

“African-American women must take this threat seriously and realize that CRC is not colorblind,” said Lorraine Cole, executive director and CEO of The Imperative during the launch of the African American Women Dare to Be Aware initiative. “Dare to Be Aware provides African-American women with the knowledge and tools they need to take action against this deadly but treatable disease.”

“African-American women face many barriers to prevention and treatment of CRC but getting beyond our own fear and learning the facts can go a long way in improving our survival and quality of life,” said Dr. Edith Mitchell, clinical professor of medicine and program leader in gastrointestinal oncology at Thomas Jefferson University. “CRC is not a death sentence, so don’t let that stop you from asking your health care provider about screening and treatment.”

Cox is hopeful that awareness and education will save other African-American women from having similar experiences as she. After being diagnosed with CRC and treated with surgery and

intravenous chemotherapy, she remained cancer-free for seven years. However, after becoming ill during a family vacation in October 2005, she found herself once again faced with devastating news—her colon cancer had recurred. This time, following surgery to remove another part of her colon, Cox was given an oral chemotherapy treatment that she can take at home or while traveling, which in turn has not only reduced the need for her to go to the clinic for treatment as often, but also enabled her to spend more precious time with friends and family. “I know how scary it can be to hear the word ‘cancer,’ but we can’t let fear get in our way. I’m encouraging all African-American women over the age of 45 to talk to their doctors about getting screened. A simple test could help save your life,” said Cox.

For more information about the African-American Women Dare to Be Aware initiative, which provides information on CRC and the importance of preventive screening, as well as free CRC educational materials, please visit The Imperative’s Web site at www.BlackWomensHealth.org or the NWHRC Web site at www.healthywoman.org. For more information on oral chemotherapy treatment, please visit www.Oralchemoadvisor.com.