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PREPARING FOR A COLONOSCOPY

Q: I am a 52-year-old woman diagnosed with limited scleroderma. I have recently been referred to have a colonoscopy. As a scleroderma patient with extreme gastrointestinal-related issues, is there anything in particular I should have them look for? Any concerns I should raise about the procedure or preparing for it?

A: There are a few issues to consider in this situation.

First, with regard to the risk of the procedure: We typically do not think of there being any additional risks for a standard colonoscopy in scleroderma. However, some patients with severe bowel disease may have very dilated colon or bowel as a result. In those patients, we worry about the additional pressure induced by the colonoscopy causing perforation of the colon, and we may defer a colonoscopy in that situation until the bowels are under better control.

There is no particular concern about preparing for a colonoscopy, unless scleroderma has affected your kidneys. If your kidney function is abnormal, you want to avoid some preparations, such as those containing phosphorus.

Typically, there are no specific findings on colonoscopy that provide insight into scleroderma's pathology. The testing often is used to exclude other bowel problems such as inflammatory bowel disease.

In addition, we think that the overall risk of cancer in scleroderma patients is slightly higher than the general population. Therefore, this test is a very important screening for colon cancer.