Area colon cancer rates among highest

Link to region's Cajun heritage suggested

BY SETH DICKERSON
Special to The Advocate

Colorectal cancer rates in the Acadiana region are among the nation's highest, a health issue possibly linked to the region's Cajun heritage, according to a study by the LSU Health New Orleans School of Public Health.

The possible link was found when researchers examined cancer data in parishes with the largest population of French speakers from 2005 to 2009. The study found higher colorectal cancer rates for those parishes than state and national rates.

"Obviously, we'd need to do further studies to try and figure out if it's a hereditary effect or if there's some kind of environmental risk factor or if it's some kind of combination of both," said Dr. Jordan Karlitz, gastroenterologist at the Tulane University School of Medicine and adjunct faculty at the LSU Health Center.

"I think the important thing is that we identified a high-risk population, so at least we can go and study that population in more detail in hopes of preventing cancer," he said.

The study, which began in 2013, looked at 18 parishes in southwestern Louisiana with large French-speaking populations and discerned that the risk for colon cancer was higher in the region for white people and particularly white males.

Between 2005 and 2009, the study says, there were 3,288 colorectal cancer cases identified among white males in the 18-parish region, which translates into 66 cases per 100,000 people.

The state's rate for white males is 61 cases per 100,000 people. And for the nation, that rate for white males is 53.1 per 100,000 people.

The study found even higher colorectal cancer rates among white males in a subgroup of nine parishes with 10 percent or more French speakers than the other parishes studied. In those parishes, the rate of colorectal cancer cases identified among white males in the 18-parish region, which translates into 66 cases per 100,000 people.

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"This is very important to remember," Karlitz said. "I think the important thing is that we identified a high-risk population, so at least we can go and study that population in more detail in hopes of preventing cancer."

The researchers chose to study the Acadiana region because of its "founder" population, or a population that breaks off from a main population, as the Cajuns who immigrated from Canada and France to Louisiana did in the 1700s.

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