



Pay Attention

By Pamela Wallin

When it comes to your health, you are your own best early warning system.

As a journalist and a broadcaster who has conducted thousands of interviews (and the requisite research for them), I was actually surprised at my own ignorance when I was diagnosed with colorectal (bowel) cancer. In each of the countless number of medical stories I have done over the years, the message was always the same – pay attention to what your body is saying. You are your own best early warning system. The trouble is, we need to slow down long enough to hear the message over the din of our crazy, hectic lifestyles. And then, do something about it.

When the doctor utters that phrase – “I’m so sorry, it’s cancer” – it is surely one of life’s most devastating moments. Your own defense mechanisms kick into gear and the first response is denial. I wasn’t even sure what “colorectal” meant. Where exactly is the cancer and how did it get there? And how do we get it out – fast?

This is not a region of the body that anybody does much talking about. As kids, we had nicknames and cute phrases for it. As adults, we use euphemisms and more often than not it becomes – excuse the pun – the butt of many a joke. So, given our cultural sensitivities, no one much likes the idea of taking to the airwaves – or the printed page – with graphic testimonials. But if we don’t, people will continue to die from a disease that can be treated – and cured – if we catch it in time.

What I learned in this whole process – aside from the obvious, that life is

precious – is that we must be much more forceful in managing our own health. As consumers of medical care, we must become advocates for ourselves and our families. I don’t mean spending our lives surfing www.diseases.com and scaring ourselves silly. But we need to know family histories and causes of death so we’re more aware of any symptoms we may be experiencing.

In my own case, most of the symptoms were easily masked by a busy, high-stress lifestyle. Only in the latter stages when bleeding occurred did I finally see a doctor – and then, only after my father read me the riot act.

When you visit your doctor, insist – whether there’s a family history or not – on a colonoscopy. The test isn’t that bad, although I admit the day-long prep isn’t pleasant, but it beats the alternative – dying of cancer. Researchers at Sunnybrook & Women’s have been awarded a grant to determine if a less-invasive procedure called a flexible sigmoidoscopy is potentially useful for detecting signs of the disease.

If you are diagnosed, arm yourself with information. Journalistic lesson number one: Do your homework. It’s a valuable distraction – and it may help save your life.

And, finally, talk about it. We need to break the taboos about talking about “those parts down there.” Colorectal cancer isn’t a disease that Hollywood stars are likely to embrace, so it’s up to those of us who can to spread the word. It’s a matter of life or death.

Fast Facts

- Colorectal cancer refers to cancer that starts in either the **colon or the rectum**. The colon and rectum make up the large bowel (or large intestine).
- Colorectal cancer is the **second most common** cause of cancer deaths in women and men in Canada.
- All men and women are at risk of getting colorectal cancer, although the majority of colorectal cancers affect people **over age 50**.
- Anyone at increased risk for colorectal cancer (if you have a family history, for example) and everyone over age 50 should speak to their doctor about **what tests** might be most appropriate for them.

Signs and Symptoms

- blood or mucous in your stool
- a change in your usual bowel habits (constipation or diarrhea)
- crampy abdominal pain or discomfort that persists or comes and goes
- unexplained tiredness
- unexplained weight loss

Note: Most of the above signs are not caused by cancer, but it is important to report them to your family doctor.

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