

Dear editor,

Colon Cancer Awareness for Those Under 50

Many of your readers may not know this but March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month. While colon cancer doesn't get as much publicity as breast cancer, according to medical reports, "it's the second leading cause of cancer deaths (after lung cancer) in the US, even though it is largely preventable. Caught at an early stage, it has a 90% survival rate."

According to "Conquering Colon Cancer" article "Colorectal cancer is often thought of as a disease of the elderly, but **10% of those diagnosed are younger than fifty.**"

"The guidelines typically suggest screening at age 50, because that's when the incident of colon cancer becomes statistically significant," states a corporate spokesperson from Lilly. This age determination needs to be changed. I know. At 42, I had stage two (stage four is the worst) colon cancer of my ascending colon. I was a healthy working mom who didn't smoke or drink and ate healthy and exercised. In essence, I was "low risk" for getting cancer, but I got cancer anyway.

According to medical articles and research for **those under age 50**, there is a predominance of right-sided lesions or ascending colon (the opposite side of your butt) tumors. Since the colon is six feet long, the typical signs associated with colon cancer aren't always relevant in **those under 50**. The National Colorectal Cancer Research Alliance lists the signs of colon cancer as rectal bleeding, changes in bowel habits, blood in the stool, abdominal pain, and weight loss.

My sign? "Fatigue" caused by acute iron deficiency anemia, which was detected through a routine CBC (complete blood count). Even though my hemoglobin level was drastically low (6.8, when it should have been between 12 to 16), I *really* felt fine. I asked myself and my doctors "How can fatigue be a sign of cancer? Aren't all working moms tired?"

Because of my "early onset", my surgeon Dr. John Marks from Lankenau recommended that my only sibling, my older sister, get a colonoscopy. Since she had no "signs" and was **under 50**, her doctor would NOT recommend the procedure and furthermore her insurance company would NOT pay for it. Four years later (at the magic age of 50) she had one and thankfully, she's fine

I read that Crozer Keystone Health System will be offering FREE colorectal cancer screenings later this month. Please take advantage of this service.

The best option for screening is a colonoscopy to detect polyps and allow doctors to remove them before they possibly become cancerous. If you do have to get a colonoscopy, make sure you take all the pills, drink all the fluids, whatever your doctor recommends so you have a COMPLETE cleansing. I know--the stuff tastes absolutely terrible and the prep the day before is far from fun. Tell family members and roommates to free up the bathroom!

After her 42-year-old husband's death of colon cancer, in March 2000 Katie Couric had her "live" colonoscopy on the "Today" show (I was home recuperating from surgery). She recommended sucking on a lime after drinking the dreaded gook. Also, suck on Altoids. Treat yourself to something special the day after the procedure.

Medical experts recommend people of “average risk” have a colonoscopy once every ten years, but for those with “early onset” like me and many others, Dr. Marks recommends I have one every other year and a sigmoidoscopy (checks lower third of colon) the other years.

So, if you are hesitant (or even embarrassed) to schedule the procedure ... think of the possible consequences.

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