

A Cancer Survivor's Story: Putting Off Colonoscopy Nearly Cost Him His Life

By Michael Race

Colorectal cancer – one of the most commonly diagnosed cancers – is expected to afflict more than 153,000 people and claim about 52,550 lives in the U.S. this year alone, according to the American Cancer Society. March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness month, a good time to learn about causes, symptoms and prevention.

Pat Kehoe was 52 years old in 2020 when he noticed a small amount of blood in his stool. Having no family history of colorectal cancer and no other medical issues, he wasn't overly concerned, but checked in with his doctor just to be safe.

His doctor immediately scheduled a colonoscopy, something Kehoe had put off even though it is recommended starting at age 50.

"As soon as I wake up from the procedure, my doctor is there and says, 'I'm 99 percent sure you have rectal cancer,'" Kehoe recalled.

"Hearing that news, I'm just trying to absorb it."

A biopsy confirmed the doctor's suspicion: Kehoe had stage 3 rectal cancer – a relatively late stage of cancer that requires more aggressive treatment.

Kehoe's story is, unfortunately, becoming more common.

[American Cancer Society research](#) finds instances of colorectal cancer among adults under 55 increased from 11% in 1995 to 20% in 2019. And more cases of advanced colorectal cancer are being seen among younger age groups, with rates of advanced cancer increasing by about 3% annually in people under 50.

That troubling trend is one reason the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force – a panel of nationally recognized experts in prevention, evidence-based medicine, and primary care – has [lowered the recommended age](#) for colorectal cancer screenings from 50 years old to 45. The recommendation applies to those who have no signs or symptoms of colorectal cancer and who are at average risk, meaning they have no family history or other conditions that might make colorectal cancer more likely.

Kehoe sees himself as a cautionary tale for those who might put off getting screened.

After his diagnosis, Kehoe endured what he describes as a "very aggressive treatment" regimen that included three months of chemotherapy, followed by targeted radiation

treatments every weekday for roughly two months and concluding with surgery to remove a portion of his rectum and temporarily put in a colostomy bag. It was a brutal process, he said.

“I was so sick between the radiation and the chemo pills,” he recalled. “The thing with the radiation is, even after you’re done with the treatment, it’s still affecting your body.”

He also notes his treatment required multiple CT scans and colonoscopies – an ironic twist considering he put off a routine colonoscopy when he turned 50.

“I try not to be preachy about it, but I do tell people that if I had gone in two years earlier like I should have, I might not have ended up going through all of this these last couple years,” Kehoe said.

Today, Kehoe is cancer free and is making some changes in the hopes of staying that way. He has cut back on red meat and processed foods, and is trying to exercise more and take better care of himself in general. As a preventive measure, he has bloodwork every three months and maintains routine doctor appointments.

He has blunt advice for anyone who might be putting off a colonoscopy because they don’t think it’s important: “Don’t mess around and don’t wait ... go get it! If it’s caught earlier, it’s much easier to treat.”

Some common signs of colorectal cancer:

- A change in bowel habits, such as diarrhea, constipation, or narrowing of the stool that lasts for more than a few days.
- A feeling that you need to have a bowel movement that is not relieved by doing so.
- Rectal bleeding.
- Blood in the stool, which may make it look dark.
- Cramping or abdominal (belly) pain.
- Weakness and fatigue.
- Unintended weight loss.

(Source: [American Cancer Society](#))