

My mother's fight

Mom's battle with cancer teaches lessons about regular screenings and do's and don't's

My mother has colon cancer.

She was diagnosed in November 2007. Mom is one of those folks who never went to the doctor for anything and even kind of prided herself about that. The only reason she went is because she had not gone to the bathroom in several days and the pain was becoming unbearable.

The local doctor in Waverly, Tenn., took an X-ray and immediately sent her to Nashville. I got a call mid-morning from my brother telling me what was going on. Anyway, they did emergency surgery to put a stent in her bowel to open it up. She spent about four weeks in the hospital before being sent home to start chemotherapy. Then, in January 2008, the stent apparently perforated the tumor and she had to be rushed to Nashville where they did emergency surgery to create a colostomy.

She spent another month in the hospital and is now back at home. She has a treatment every two weeks and has had to have additional surgery to close the original wound. Mom turned 70 last September and her life has been literally turned upside down. She is actually adjusting to the colostomy much better than I probably would. As is always the case in these kinds of situations, she has good days and bad days. I try to get over to see her as much as I can.

The doctors all agree that Mom's condition could have been prevented had she started routine screenings for colon cancer at about age 40. Her father died of colon cancer in 1978 and two of her brothers and sisters also suffered from the same disease. In Mom's case, the doctor said the tumor had probably been there for six to eight years; the cancer had already spread to her liver and other organs by the time she was diagnosed.

I love Mom dearly and I hate to see her suffer. I accompanied her to the doctor Jan. 21. It was not a pleasant experience; she was very emotional and had a difficult time maintaining her composure.

Her experience has really opened my eyes to a lot of things. Instead of making me ques-

Spotlight



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you are dealing with a relative, friend or other loved one who has cancer.

•Don't talk about the person as if he/she is not in the room. Sometimes people (family members, friends and even nurses) have a bad habit of saying things like, "She looks pretty good," or, "It looks like she's lost weight," or even, "I know she's miserable," with my mother sitting right there able to hear everything that's being said. If the person is there, talk to him or her or at least acknowledge that he or she is there.

•Don't talk about the obvious. Telling my mother that she should have had regular checkups earlier in life serves no useful purpose other than to make her feel even worse. I'm sure there's not a minute that goes by that Mom doesn't wish she had gone in for a checkup; she is acutely aware that her current condition was preventable. Being constantly reminded of what she "should have done" is simply cruel and insensitive.

•Don't talk about other people (especially loved ones) who have had cancer in attempt to "relate" — especially if the outcome was not good. My aunt, whom I love dearly and is well-meaning, continually wants to talk about how her husband died of cancer a few years ago and what a horrible, drawn-out experience that was. I think she is trying to be comforting in some strange sense, but all it does is serve to make Mom even more depressed and

tion my faith, this experience has made my faith in God even stronger. It has certainly made me rethink my priorities in life and I now have a much greater appreciation for the supreme importance of relationships. Ultimately, they are all that truly matter.

I would like to pass along some personal observations that may or may not be useful to you if

it precipitates feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. I am sure Mom knows her prognosis.

•Don't imply that it would be better if this were "over." Statements such as, "Well, she's had a good, long life," "Anything would be better than seeing her suffer like this," or "She's going to a better place," are not well-received even if they are true. I understand the sentiment and think that those who make these kinds of comments are well-meaning, but they usually aren't very comforting. I don't like to see Mom suffer anymore than anyone would. But she is my mother and she is not ready to die just yet. I want to have her in my life as long as possible.

I know that these suggestions may seem somewhat negative (in that it is a list of don't's, but I did want to pass along this advice while it was still fresh on my mind. I do believe in being realistic, but I also believe in compassion. If you are uncomfortable and/or don't know what to say around someone who has cancer, be conservative. Say nothing.

The bad thing about colon cancer is that by the time symptoms appear, the disease has likely progressed to the point where it is life-threatening. Both my brother and I had colonoscopies recently and what everyone says is true — the worst thing about it is the prep you have to do the day before.

My hope is that others can learn from Mom's experience. She would want that; she has always been more concerned about others than herself. Throughout her whole ordeal, her primary concern has been for my dad.

The bottom line is that if you are 50 (40 with a family history), and have not already done so, you need to have a colonoscopy. If there is such a thing as a "silent killer," then colon cancer definitely falls into that category. Get checked.

Editor's note: Hughey is a professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.

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