

Colon Cancer: Knowing the Signs

Earlier this month fans across the country were shocked when they learned of the passing of actress Kirstie Alley. The actress, who was 71, died after a brief battle with colon cancer. Her recent passing has brought [colon cancer](#) to the forefront once again.

While not all of the details surrounding Alley's cancer diagnosis are known, her sudden passing has people wondering if the diagnosis came at a later stage. Deborah Oyelowo, an OSF HealthCare oncology advanced practice nurse, says it is certainly possible since the [symptoms](#) of colon cancer are vague which makes it harder to detect early on.

"The GI system is a big, complex system. It needs a lot of dissection, follow-ups, questioning, and paying attention to diagnose and manage things with the GI system. And with colorectal cancer, that is a different ballgame entirely because it can go from zero to 100 quickly," says Oyelowo.

Recent studies have shown that colon cancer cases are [on the rise in young adults](#). In 2020, *Black Panther* star Chadwick Boseman passed away at the age of 43 from the disease. This, however, does not mean cases of colon cancer in older adults are decreasing. What it does mean is that it is important to be aware of any potential signs or symptoms.

One red flag in particular is rectal bleeding. Many people who experience rectal bleeding wait for it to get worse before seeking medical attention, or they might brush it off and ignore it completely. Oyelowo says people tend to assume rectal bleeding is due to a hemorrhoid or because they are constipated or have been exercising more frequently – especially if it does not happen consistently or frequently.

Oftentimes, people are embarrassed to tell anyone if they are experiencing rectal bleeding. However, it is important to document any rectal bleeding and to mention it to your doctor.

"Hemorrhoids or not, any kind of bleeding is abnormal. From hemorrhoids, polyps can develop into an actual mass. And some people think it's just polyps, but what type of polyp is it? Sometimes people tell me they were told they developed polyps when they were pregnant, but was there a biopsy? Do we know if it came back? Is there bleeding that is consistent? It could be hemorrhoids, but no one can know for sure without a screening," Oyelowo explains.

It is better to be safe than sorry. Your provider can refer you to a specialist if they believe it calls for further evaluation. While rectal bleeding can be a more alarming sign of colon cancer, other common signs can fly under the radar completely.

"One of the things we have seen is weight loss without trying. A significant weight loss. I am not talking about five pounds, but 10, 15, 20, or more without trying. Other signs are constant diarrhea for no reason or waking up sweating or you notice something just feels off. I just think people need to pay attention to their bodies and know when to seek help," says Oyelowo.

Because Alley was 71 when she died, questions began circulating about whether or not the risk for colon cancer increases in women who have gone through menopause. This is not proven, but Oyelowo advises women who are going through or have gone through menopause to pay attention to their bodies and any changes they are experiencing and keep their doctor informed. A person who is experiencing signs of colon cancer might assume what they are feeling is due to changes in their body from menopause, so knowing what to expect during and after menopause can help better identify signs that are unrelated to it.

Some people avoid talking to their doctor because they look up their symptoms and determine on their own that there is no need to worry. Oyelowo says there is nothing wrong with turning to the internet for answers, but to not rely solely on "Dr. Google" for your medical advice.

If you have even one thing going on with your body that feels off to you, Oyelowo says that alone is reason enough to bring it up to your healthcare provider. Even if colon cancer is ruled out, developing a baseline of your health history with your provider will help them really get to know you and is beneficial in the long run, especially if any new signs or symptoms develop in the future.

"I don't think any symptom is minor. I think people need to just focus on the main thing: signs and symptoms. And if you have any issue, it would not hurt to talk to your provider about it. If your provider thinks something is more severe, they can refer you to a specialist. I don't think any one symptom is lesser compared to someone else, because a symptom you think is minor is based on your own personal scope of view. It could actually be a huge thing when you tell a provider about that symptom," Oyelowo advises.

When it comes to any type of cancer, early detection is key. Pay attention to your body, trust your gut, and make an appointment with your primary care provider if you feel like something might be going on. If you do not have a primary care provider, find one at <https://www.osfhealthcare.org>.