

15-Year-Old Shares Colonoscopy Journey, Inspires Awareness (Print)

While many 15-year-olds are focused on practicing for their upcoming driving exam, Jaxson Brown's focus was on something else. Something only ever thought to be experienced by adults. And even then, a procedure a lot of people push off and dread: a colonoscopy.

A colonoscopy at age 15

But why? Those at an average risk of colorectal cancer are recommended to start getting [colonoscopies](#) once every ten years, starting at 45 years of age.

"My dad was diagnosed after just turning 26. Because it was colon cancer, they recommended I be seen ten years before. The doctors said when I turned 15 to get a colonoscopy," Jaxson says. He was just a baby when his father passed away.

Jaxson's father, Michael, was an avid runner in great shape. Angie Brown, Michael's wife and Jaxson's mother, says Michael had no family history of colon cancer, and never drank or smoked. At the age of 26, Michael was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer. He underwent six months of chemotherapy and was in remission for almost four years. In 2013, Michael was diagnosed with a rare form of stage 4 colon cancer called signet ring cell adenocarcinoma.

"If he can do it, I can do it!"

Angie says for years, she has helped prepare her sons to know the importance of cancer screening, and that they'd have to undergo a colonoscopy from a young age.

"He figured that if he could go out there and show people that a 15-year-old boy is willing to go through a colonoscopy, without having any symptoms, then anybody can do it," Angie says. "We had a good amount of people who sent messages and said, 'if he can do it, I can do it!'"

Jaxson says it helped to know from a young age that the day was coming. Afterwards, he said it "wasn't that bad."

"They have you roll over on your side, then they inject the stuff in, and it works like a charm. You're out and don't remember a thing. Best sleep you'll ever get," Jaxson laughs.

Jaxson's bravery can inspire others

Daniel Martin, MD, a gastroenterologist with OSF HealthCare, oversaw Jaxson's treatment. He says Jaxson's bravery to undergo something uncomfortable, yet potentially lifesaving, should be inspiration for everyone.

"Colon cancer, if caught early (even if not caught at a polyp stage), is a very treatable condition. Where in the early stages of disease, greater than 90% of those patients are going to be disease free at five years," Dr. Martin says. "One of the advantages of colorectal cancer screening is that we can prevent the disease. With colorectal cancer, in a colonoscopy, you can identify the precursor lesions called polyps and remove them during the exam."

Colon cancer is the third-most diagnosed form of cancer in both men and women.

"Lung is first for both, breast cancer is second for women, then colorectal cancer is third. For men, prostate is second, colorectal cancer is third. Colon cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer mortality in this country," Dr. Martin explains.

The prevalence of colon cancer, along with the rareness of Michael's signet ring colon cancer, led Angie and Michael to launch the [Michael P. Brown Colon Cancer Foundation](#) which lives by the motto "Get Busy Living."

"A lot of people think you're guaranteed a long life, especially if they've had parents who lived into their 80s and 90s," Angie says. "You just never know what's going to happen. If you have a bucket list, start doing those things. Don't wait until you're retired."

The Foundation hosts Michael's 5K Run for Life each year, raising money for signet ring research

"We try to be an outlet for people to get information about signet ring colon cancer. My husband used to field most of those calls, but now I do. My boys are getting involved too," Angie says. "If there's a parent who has cancer, they're willing to talk to kids about that."

Signs and symptoms of colon cancer

"The most common concern would be bleeding in your stool. But that would also include abdominal pain that's new or different," Dr. Martin says. "Or changes in the frequency or caliber of your stools."

This was mainly the case with Michael, Angie says.

"Initially, my husband's symptom was belly pain. He was put on a couple of different medications because it was thought to be a stomach ulcer," Angie says. "It didn't work. He started having constipation, diarrhea and vomiting. We went into the emergency department, and he got the diagnosis of colon cancer."

Traditionally, colon cancer is seen in people in their 60s and 70s. However, more younger people are starting to be diagnosed with colon cancer, Dr. Martin says.

"Specific to colorectal cancer, there are various options available now for screening. We recommend procedural screening with colonoscopy whenever possible. But with the advent of stool studies that are readily available and have been covered by insurance, that has helped increase the pool of patients who are receiving appropriate screening," Dr. Martin says. These readily available options are so important, Dr. Martin says, because most colon cancer patients are getting diagnosed at a later stage in the disease.

In the past, things like smoking, obesity and unhealthy lifestyle choices have been thought to cause colon cancer. Dr. Martin says in addition to that, more recent studies have shown processed foods to be a concern as well, adding that our gut's microbiome may show early indicators of cancer. A [study](#) done by Harvard Medical School investigators found that certain types of gut bacteria could lead to the development of precancerous colon polyps.

Dr. Martin credits the OSF HealthCare cancer tumor boards and medical teams for creating a more organized process over the last five to 10 years that takes care of patients from diagnosis to treatment.

Jaxson says now that it's all said and done, the colonoscopy process was not as bad as most people think. This is on par with what most patients say, Dr. Martin adds. His word of caution? Many of his patients undergoing a colon cancer diagnosis wish they would have gotten colonoscopies earlier on.

To schedule a screening, speak with your primary care provider first and get a referral. You can find more information about colonoscopies on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).