

Spaghetti for Breakfast

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 17 June 2014 12:48

Hear that quirky sound? Bzzzzt. Nothing makes time fly quite like an impending colonoscopy (ok, maybe tax day looming on the horizon or your semi-favorite crowd of relatives scheduled to visit from out of town). My June 2 colonoscopy approached with increasing speed as the previous one in 2009 spiraled into a tiny retreating speck in the rearview mirror. My, how quickly five years can whiz by when it comes to scheduled major medical tests.

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Like many adults—though not nearly enough according to cancer specialists – I scheduled my first colonoscopy when the calendar said, 'Hey pal, you're approaching the half century mark, how would you like to enjoy another few decades?' The first couple of exams, though hardly pleasant, went off smoothly enough in Connecticut; the next few came due like clockwork here in Beaufort County and were okay. Butt of course!

This time around, I thought that doing some extra research on colonoscopies might be a good idea. Maybe it would provide a little extra motivation. With all the information readily available, it didn't take long to gather some interesting facts. First the headline: colorectal cancer is a major public enemy. Not number one, but plenty close enough. About 50,000 people die from this disease every year in the US. To put that in perspective, it's the equivalent of every living soul in Hoboken, NJ (yes indeed, the birthplace of Frank Sinatra himself) or nearly half the population of Charleston, and four times the population of Beaufort. Fifty thousand people each year, dead, most of them unnecessarily. And it's not an easy way to check out of this world of ours. The pain, suffering and costs are tremendous and often extend far beyond the patient.

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer related deaths in the US. Overall, the lifetime chance of developing this disease is about 5%. This risk is slightly lower in women than in men, and somewhat lower among whites than African Americans. In 2011, there were an estimated 1.2 million people living with colon and rectum cancer in the United States. This is roughly equal to the population of Dallas.

Well, we all have to die sometime from something, a typical rationalization for not signing up for this exam, but we do have some control over colon and rectal cancer. It's really kind of up there with wearing a seat belt and not driving when impaired. So sign me up for a screening test, I said to my GI physician (and good friend) Dr. Joel Ingegno.

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Still looking for more information, perhaps to help settle my nerves a bit, I picked up a copy of the wonderful pamphlet that's available in his office, "Colonoscopy for Dummies" by Kathleen A. Dobie and Dr. Carol Burke. What an interesting read, complete with some potentially award winning quotes:

"Colonoscopy isn't exactly a glamorous procedure [no kidding, ladies]... (it) has long suffered from a bad rap, but the reputation isn't deserved...

The fact is that colonoscopy is a vital, potentially life-saving procedure... the gold standard for preventing or catching problems in the colon and rectum.

Despite the fact that screening methods, including colonoscopy, are very effective, colon cancer screening remains underused and lags far behind screening for breast and cervical cancers."

And then my favorite:

"Colonoscopies can actually prevent cancer from developing because polyps are removed during the procedure."

Armed with all this wonderful information, I launched headlong into the (usually) dreaded preparation. This involved a light breakfast the day before and then a diet of only clear liquids until C-day. Plus two doses of a frankly nasty tasting liquid that hastens bowel evacuation. I won't mince words here. The stuff reminded me of the bottom of a urinal, especially that whitish puck of disinfectant material in one of those old-timey bus stations or ballparks in the Midwest, you know the kind. This prepping liquid is dynamite in a bottle quite apart from the taste. As in find a bathroom and stay close to it, maybe even camp out there for a while. Bring a book, or your phone, maybe a pad to doodle on. Eventually, though, it gets easier and things begin to clear up (if you get my drift). Hopefully, you can get to the car with your driver without having an, uh, accident and needing to get dressed again.

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When June 2 arrived, I was indeed "squeaky clean" per the staff's inquiry (gosh, no one had ever asked me that before!). Well, one ought to be after upwards of 20 trips to the toilet. And it turns out I may be part of a trend of sorts. "The Week" magazine reports under the heading of "Rise of the Bathroom Workforce" that according to a survey by Ikea of over 8,000 people worldwide, "some people aren't bothered by working 'on the pot.'" This includes at least 17% of respondents in New York and Stockholm [hmm, a whole new definition of Stockholm syndrome!] who admitted to having worked or studied while using the toilet." Of course reading the newspaper there would have to qualify, right? (Yeah, right, scanning the "business" section for starters.)

My procedure took place at the Surgery Center of Beaufort on Ribaut Road. Aside from the wonderful support I received from Dr. Ingegno and his office next door, the staff at the Center was superb. I received pre-op instructions from Joan, one of the RN's; in-process care from Erin (RN) and Christina (Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist); and post-op care and guidance from Susan and Dona (both RN's). Susan was very helpful in threading me through straightforward instructions despite the leftover haze of propofol they had administered to render the actual procedure painless and subjectively instantaneous. It feels like you go directly from the IV insertion to the recovery room. Magic. She also called me the next day to see how I was faring. Thanks, everyone.

Probably the best part of one's colonoscopy experience is the simple pleasure of being able to begin eating normally again after the procedure. I had squirreled away a raisin bran muffin in the car for the drive home, and yes, it was truly the best muffin experience of my life (thank you Publix!). But the best was yet to come. Arriving home, nothing appealed to me more than a steaming plate of spaghetti with marinara sauce and lots of parmesan cheese. Yes, it was still morning but the box of pasta said nothing about your needing to eat it for lunch or dinner. This was a victory meal, and it took first place in the "eat anything you want" drawing in my head.

I've never been one for cold pizza in the morning, but that spaghetti was the best. Combined with the favorable test results it was a nice celebration. Spaghetti for breakfast on the back end of a vital and successful test. I highly recommend it (the spaghetti, too).