

When Dad Got Sick

As an 8-year-old, I struggled to comprehend my father's cancer diagnosis.

October 1, 2019 By [Caroline Tien](#)

Colon cancer isn't, for lack of a better word, a glamorous cancer. The disease affects an internal organ whose appeal is limited at best. Perhaps this is because the illness compromises bodily functions that are the butt of jokes (no pun intended) more often than they are the subject of serious discussion. But colon cancer, aka colorectal cancer, deserves our attention, if only out of respect for the 5% of American adults, a [disproportionate number](#) of them Black, who will be diagnosed with this condition at some point in their lives. My father, a doctor, was one of these individuals affected.

In the fall of 2005, at age 50, my dad went from healthy to critically ill in the span of a few weeks. His first colonoscopy—a preventive screening procedure involving the use of an endoscopic camera to examine the bowel—turned up a malignant polyp on the inner lining of his large intestine.

At the time, I was just 8 years old and too young to fully appreciate the gravity of the situation. But I was old enough to know that something was amiss. My father was gone for days at a stretch. My mother had begun to make me attend group therapy, and my grandparents, who had never been keen to leave their Westport, Connecticut, home, drove up to babysit me and my brothers on multiple occasions.

The official diagnosis was Stage I colon cancer, which can generally be treated with surgery. But as fate would have it, surgery only prolonged my father's medical ordeal. He had the bad luck of booking his appointment at 10 p.m. on a weekday, when the members of the surgical team were burned-out and eager to go home to their families.

Though my father surfaced from his bout of anesthesia-induced shut-eye five hours later without any apparent ill effects, it soon became evident that something had gone seriously wrong in the course of the operation. An artery, or major blood vessel, had not been tied off.

A few days later, my father awoke in the middle of the night to find himself hemorrhaging violently, losing blood at such a rapid rate that he collapsed in the hospital's hallway upon arrival. By sunrise, he'd lost three liters of blood; to put that into perspective, the average human body contains about five. The nurse who tried and failed to find somewhere to stick the IV line, told my mother, memorably, that his veins were essentially flat.

At the time, I knew nothing of this; it was five in the morning, and I was fast asleep. But even if I'd been aware of the situation, I don't think I would've been especially concerned. After all, when you're a kid, you think of your parents as superhuman, invulnerable to the various diseases, accidents and acts of God that befall others. You'd no more entertain the possibility of either one of them dying than you would think of the sun imploding or the sky falling. Indeed, even if I'd wanted to consider such a catastrophe, I don't think I could have.

My entire life was structured around my father's presence. He drove me to school in the mornings and picked me up from school in the afternoons. He helped me with math homework on weekdays and took me ice-skating on weekends. He was the star around which I orbited, and the prospect of him dying was so inconceivable as to be impossible.

This was the case until my mother took me and my brothers to visit him in the hospital a few days later. The sight of my father splayed flat on his back in the hospital bed, hooked up to a cat's cradle of medical tubing, bouquet upon bouquet of flowers by his bedside, is one of the most vivid memories I have from that period in my life. He looked weaker than I could have ever imagined he could, and, hanging back, I had the irrational sense that he would break if I so much as touched him.

But when he opened his eyes, which seemed weighted down with black bags of sleeplessness, and smiled, that impression was dispelled.

Thankfully, my father recovered fully. Now, at age 64, he has been cancer-free for almost 15 years. However, had it not been for his commitment to cancer prevention, as evidenced by that first colonoscopy, he might not be here today.

To learn more about colon cancer, click [here](#). And, if you're interested in reducing your colon cancer risk, read "[Just Five Lifestyle Changes May Help Prevent Colon Cancer](#)."