

## **NEWS**

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**Contact:** Christine Myron | Public Information Officer  
(208) 327-8639 | Cell: (208) 871-1712

### **March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month: Screening Could Save Your Life**

**Boise** — For Pastor Mike Freeman of Boise, polyps have assumed an unwelcomed place among three generations of his family. It was 37 years ago when Freeman was faced with losing his colon to a cluster of polyps. At the age of 18 he had to make some tough decisions, “I knew nothing about the symptoms or what to watch for. It wasn’t even on my grid,” said Freeman. While Freeman’s polyps were discovered before they become cancerous, he decided to have his colon removed. Freeman had lost his mother to cancer five years earlier, and his own experience quickly brought the pieces together — colon cancer ran in the family.

Cancer of the colon and rectum is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths among men and women combined in Idaho and throughout the United States. Colorectal cancer starts as precancerous polyps that form in the colon or rectum. Fortunately, polyps can easily be detected, tested and removed before they progress into cancerous tissue.

While screening is generally recommended to begin at age 50, your age and family history will help your health care provider suggest when you should begin screening and the type of test that is most appropriate for you. For those with a family history of colon cancer among first-degree relatives, the risk is nearly doubled.

For Pastor Freeman, this statistic would prove all too true. Four of Freeman’s five children inherited polyps at young ages – one of them just nine years old. All four children underwent surgery to have their rectum removed. In 2012, symptoms of low energy, weight loss and anemia would bring a diagnosis of cancer for Freeman, followed by the removal of six inches of his upper intestine and chemotherapy. Freeman strongly encourages people to learn their family history and listen to their bodies. “Pay attention or the symptoms will make you pay attention. If you wait too long, you’re accruing a much greater cost,” stated Freeman.

The most basic colon cancer screening available is the Fecal Occult Blood Test, which is available free through the Idaho CareLine at 2-1-1. In the comfort of your own home, the test detects hidden blood in the stool, which is a warning sign of cancer. The free screening kit also provides information on the steps you may need to take in preventing and screening for the cancer.

To **reduce your risk** of colon cancer the American Cancer Society suggests:

- Increase the intensity and amount of physical activity
- Limit intake of red and processed meats
- Get the recommended levels of calcium and vitamin D
- Eat more vegetables and fruits and maintain a healthy diet
- Avoid obesity and weight gain around the midsection
- Avoid excess alcohol

Pastor Freeman has been cancer-free for two years now. Every six months he has his blood drawn, and has more invasive scans and exams done annually and every five years. While cancer has been all too common in his family, Freeman manages to see the positive, "The hard stuff is the fuel that produces character, maturity and deep appreciation for life."

If you have questions regarding colon cancer prevention or screening, contact your healthcare provider or the Idaho CareLine at 2-1-1.

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