

What Kirstie Alley's Death Tells Us About Colorectal Cancer Screening.

CU Cancer Center leader Chris Lieu, MD, says the 'Cheers' actress' death underscores the importance of screening and early detection.

December 14, 2022 By Greg Glasgow at the University of Colorado Cancer Center

Actress Kirstie Alley, best known for her role as Rebecca Howe on the 1980s sitcom "Cheers," died Monday at age 71. According to a representative for the actress quoted in People magazine, Alley died from [colon cancer](#) after a short battle with the disease.

The [American Cancer Society](#) says that excluding skin cancers, colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer diagnosed in the U.S. The organization estimates that in 2022, there will 106,180 new cases of colon cancer in the U.S. and 52,580 deaths from the disease. In spring 2021, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force lowered its recommended screening age for colorectal cancer (the combined term for colon cancer and rectal cancer) to 45 from 50.

We spoke with [Chris Lieu](#), MD, associate director of clinical research at the [University of Colorado Cancer Center](#), about Alley's death and what people should know about detecting and preventing colorectal cancer.

According to her family, Kirstie Alley died of a colon cancer that was only recently discovered. What's the lesson there in terms of getting screened early for colorectal cancer?

It's important to note that early detection oftentimes either leads to prevention or early diagnosis, where the cure rates are a lot higher. The gold standard is still a colonoscopy, but the old adage is that the best screening test is the one that gets done. People should talk to their primary care providers about what screening options are best for them, but colonoscopy remains the best prevention and diagnostic test that we have.

Are there any good treatment options for people who don't detect colorectal cancer early and advance to a later stage of the disease?

We like to get patients early, where we can offer outstanding multidisciplinary care, but the CU Cancer Center does run a lot of clinical trials for colorectal cancer, particularly in patients with stage IV — or late-stage — disease, which can sometimes offer hope and promise in difficult situations.

Does age 71 seem young for a colon cancer death?

Seventy-one is actually pretty average in terms of diagnosis for colon cancer, although we want people to be aware that the incidence of colorectal cancer in young patients is increasing. That's why the recommended screening age was lowered to 45 a couple of years ago, so younger people will get colonoscopies and their insurance will pay for it.

When you hear that someone had colon cancer discovered late, does that possibly indicate that they were ignoring symptoms they should have had checked out sooner?

It's always hard to say on a specific patient level, but we encourage people to not ignore concerning symptoms and signs. It could be nothing, but it could be something, and it's always better to discuss any concerning symptoms with their primary care physician. If you see blood in the toilet or on toilet paper, or if you have unexplained abdominal pain, unexplained weight loss, or unusual levels of fatigue — those are the symptoms to look out for.

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