

"Find Your Reason Why" - Alex Paul's Outlook on Colon Cancer Screening

by Coral Paul

After Alex Paul turned 50, he received a birthday present he probably was not expecting: A FIT kit in the mail.

A FIT kit, short for Fecal Immunochemical Test kit, is an easy at-home screening test for colon cancer and is provided by the Colon Cancer Prevention program. Individuals living in Nova Scotia, who are between the ages of 50-74 years old, will automatically receive a FIT kit in the mail every two years following their 50th birthday. The test looks for small traces of blood hidden in your bowel movement that you may not be able to see or feel.

As you can imagine, this wasn't exactly the kind of birthday gift you would open and get excited about. And when Alex received his kit, he remembers reading the instructions and thinking "this is impossible to do." He admits, "I threw it on the table, and it sat there." He had no symptoms. Previous scans came back clear, and between work and taking care of his family, Alex figured "I felt healthy, didn't have any of the warning signs so I kept putting it off."

His doctor, however, wasn't willing to let it go. Alex shares that due to his age and his family's history with cancer, his doctor strongly encouraged him to complete the test. Laughing at the memory, Alex says "my doctor called me out so I realized I couldn't put it off anymore."

Shortly after his doctor's visit, Alex got his kit off the table, did what he needed to do, shipped it off and awaited the results.

The results came back abnormal, and further testing confirmed Alex was dealing with something he never expected: **colorectal (colon) cancer**.

"I remember looking at my son, who was with me during the appointment, and his face looked mortified," says Alex, "I think that's when it finally sunk in that I had cancer."

The diagnosis was hard on Alex, but it was also hard on his family as they adjusted to their new reality. One of the hardest conversations Alex had following his diagnosis was telling his mother who was a nurse. Alex shares, "I was nervous to tell my mom because I knew it would devastate her, and I didn't want to be the source of that pain."

But, as hard as sharing the news with family and attending treatment were, there was one thing Alex kept thinking about: what if he never did the test?

"I'm glad I listened and it was caught before it was too late. If I didn't get screened, I don't think I'd be around today."

The Part He Didn't Want to Do

Alex admits, completing the FIT kit isn't exactly glamorous. At the end of the day, you are taking a small sample of your own poop. And while he had



Alex Paul from Membertou First Nation

kids and was no stranger to it, Alex says "There's a difference between changing diapers and dealing with your own." Even he was hesitant.

For him, the hardest part wasn't the test itself. It was getting past the thought of doing it. "It's really simple, once you get over the gross stuff."

The FIT kit is designed to make the process as easy and low contact as possible. The tools provided help minimize contact, and the steps are simple. Find a time that works for you, follow the instructions, collect a small sample, put it in the bag, wash and disinfect your hands, and mail it off for testing.

Alex's advice is to find what works for you and get it done.

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Find Your Reason

Today, Alex says his health isn't where he'd like it to be. But he's doing everything he can to take care of himself and have more time with his kids. He also wants to be around long enough to meet and spend time with his grandkids.

Alex's experience has also given him motivation to talk openly about cancer screening and he wants to share his story with anyone who will listen, especially men. He hopes his sons will take away from it that their dad was uncomfortable with the test, but he still did it – and it made a difference. "If my boys can see the importance of it, or recognize Dad was uncomfortable but still did it, may help," says Alex.

By sharing his story, he also hopes to encourage others to take the same step – to understand that being uncomfortable doesn't have to stop you from taking care of yourself. He knows talking about cancer and getting tested can be overwhelming. He also understands some people may be nervous of the health care system,

and that not everyone has had the same experiences as him with doctors and treatment.

But he also knows what happened when he "ripped the band aid off" and did the test. It found something. And finding it gave him more time. So, Alex is encouraging others to flip how they may think about cancer screening.

Instead of thinking "It's a burden, I have other things to do, or nothing's wrong so why bother," think of it like "This is something that could help."

Find your reason.

Maybe it's your kids. Your partner. Your friends. Your parents. A desire to travel. Maybe it's a chance to see your grandkids grow up. Whatever your reason is, find it, and don't put off doing the test.

Alex's experience may have helped his youngest son find his own reason, too. Being the only one still at home, he helped drive Alex to his appointments and witnessed the impacts firsthand. A couple years later, they had a conversation about what they went through.

They talked about the appointments, the treatment, and what it was like to watch his dad go through it all. That conversation has stayed with Alex to this day. He believes his youngest, in fact all his boys, will be the driving force when it comes to getting others in the family screened. Seeing what their dad went through - and knowing a simple screening test helped find the cancer - made an impression.

A FIT kit may seem like a small thing. But taking a few minutes to complete it could help find a problem before you know there is one.

Find Your Reason. Get Screened.

A Note From Alex: Throughout Alex's journey, he was supported by family members and health professionals who made a difference along the way. Alex recognizes and thanks those who cared for him, supported his family, answered his questions and helped him through treatment: Dr. Power (family doctor); Dr. Lapierre (surgeon), Dr. Saliba (oncologist); and Cailen Davis (son).

Wela'liek Alex: The Tajikeimik team sincerely thanks Alex for sharing his story with us and allowing us to share it with others. Alex, your experience reminds us why cancer screening is important. But it also reminds us that behind every diagnosis is a person with a family, a future, and people who love them. Talking openly about cancer, treatment and the experience of being screened takes courage, and we admire the strength, resilience and positivity you have shown. We also want to say that by sharing your experience honestly and openly, you are showing your sons and other men that there is strength in having these conversations, asking questions and taking care of their health – even when it feels uncomfortable.

For cancer screening information and resources, scan the QR code or visit: www.mhwns.ca/resources/cancer-screening/



About Us

Tajikeimik is the new and developing health and wellness organization that is leading health transformation on behalf of Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia. In collaboration with Chiefs, Grand Council, and Health Directors, Tajikeimik will build on and evolve the health and wellness services and programs used by Mi'kmaw people in Nova Scotia; improve health service delivery; and strengthen coordination with Federal and Provincial health system partners - with the goal of improving overall health for Mi'kmaw and communities.

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