

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Colon Cancer
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*, I'm Jeanne Blake. More than 50,000 men and women will die from colon and rectal cancer during the coming year. A diagnosis for these cancers does not have to mean death. Paul Stewart served as an NHL referee for 17 years before retiring in 2003. By then he had earned the distinction of being the first American born referee to work 1,000 regular season games. In February of 1998, five years before his retirement, Paul Stewart was diagnosed with Stage III colon cancer and returned to the ice in November of 1998 while still receiving chemotherapy and today he's looking great. How are you doing Paul?

PAUL STEWART: Well, I only reflect what I see.

JEANNE BLAKE: Uh, oh, this is going to be a long half hour!

PAUL STEWART: I feel better than ever.

JEANNE BLAKE: You look great. How are you doing in terms of your cancer?

PAUL STEWART: There is always the anxiety. It's interesting, I just had a coffee with a friend and I was explaining to him that the singularly most alone moment in my life was that minute when the doctor told me I was sick.

JEANNE BLAKE: Tell me about that.

PAUL STEWART: My wife had given birth to our son on Sunday night February 22 in 1998 and just a week prior to that I had been home because the NHL had taken a hiatus for the Olympics.

The players were in Nagano for the 98 Olympics and my wife was watching the Today show and Katie Couric had just returned from burying her husband Jay Moynihan who had died from colon cancer and they were discussing with Matt Lauer the symptoms and she kept poking me and saying you have all of those symptoms, you better go get checked. She made me get up and phone a doctor friend and I made an appointment and ironically it turned out that the appointment was the day after my son's birth. After some testing and some initial blood work and consultation he came to the conclusion that I had cancer. It was about 12 hours after my son was born. It was a big day high and then a bad day low. I called upon all my strength. It still gets me emotional.

JEANNE BLAKE: I can see that and I can understand.

PAUL STEWART: It's tough because I survived because I was physically fit. I had worked hard at my conditioning because of my job but as well I survived because the team of doctors and I use that word pointedly. The team of doctors that I teamed up with we were able to work together and I was fortunate if I had to be sick to be in a city like Boston was the great people that I worked with who in pioneering chemotherapy that made it so that I could be here today.

JEANNE BLAKE: You had surgery followed by chemotherapy. From what you've described to me off camera, you never let up for a minute.

PAUL STEWART: I discovered that the very instant that I would start to surrender those things that I was about, the things that I was doing and giving in to the disease, I would be dying. I wasn't ready for that. The other thing was that I really was in love with my son and I wanted to make sure that I could be there for those moments for him. You know it doesn't bother me; I wear my heart on my sleeve a little bit because I've always enjoyed what I do. The people, those 18,000 people that come to the rink, they may have booed me.

JEANNE BLAKE: Thrown things at you.

PAUL STEWART: Oh yeah. It's interesting because they gave me the strength and they reached out to me and they helped me. I owed it to a lot of people, not just myself to do everything I could do to get back. The reason I wouldn't quit was because I had such great examples of others that didn't quit and at the time Johnny Cohen who played with Tampa and had played at Boston University and Maurice Richard, they also had cancer and so we were sort of in it together. Then the NHL did something that I thought was fabulous. Not only have I never seen a bill for any of my cancer treatments but the Commissioner and the teams and the owners and the players and the officials association got together and they started a foundation called Hockey Fights Cancer and wouldn't you know they made me the honorary spokesperson.

JEANNE BLAKE: I wonder why?

PAUL STEWART: Imagine that. For ten years now and this is our tenth anniversary and here's our commemorative tie. We've raised nearly \$10 million dollars. We've raised a lot of awareness. I've been to all of the Ronald McDonald houses to try to help kids and people, the people that are buying the tickets, the people that are on our team and we've had others who have been actively involved in hockey. Roger Neilsen was coach of Ottawa and Billy Harris played in Toronto. Saku Koivu in Montreal and Mario Lemieux and Wayne Gretzky's mother and you go down the list you don't have to look too far left or right to see someone in hockey who's had cancer affect them.

JEANNE BLAKE: Paul, people that are living with colon cancer or love someone who's living with colon cancer or any other kind of cancer might hear your description of your fight and how

you wouldn't give up and they might not be doing as well and I wouldn't want them to feel that they are just not trying hard enough and I know that's not what you are saying.

PAUL STEWART: No. I think that the question was that I didn't give up and what did I do and every person has to find their own way to battle and they also have to work in harmony with their team of doctors and their healthcare people so that they can address this disease. They should take one cue from me which is don't surrender anything. Don't give up and even if the dark moment comes and it came for Jimmy Dalvaio, it came for Maurice Richard and Billy Harris and Roger Nielsen and Phyllis Gretzky but you know what? Colon cancer is one of the most treatable cancers of all if you get it in time. So I tell people become the referee in your own life. Make the right calls. If you haven't had a colonoscopy, if you haven't had a breast exam, a PAP smear test, if you haven't checked your skin, these are things that you can take charge of and be the decision maker on your own. I tell people to take an active involvement and knowledge is power. The internet and the library and there's so many ways that we can learn more about fighting this disease and how to do it with good health, eating and diet and certainly timely testing.

JEANNE BLAKE: Has your diet changed since you've been diagnosed?

PAUL STEWART: I haven't had red meat in ten years. I've cut way back on a lot of those things that would be considered high fat. I eat a lot of grain and things like that. I eat a lot of fish. As the doctor said to me, do you like roast beef? I said, I love roast beef, he goes do you like steak? I said I love steak. He said you can eat corned beef too you know. I said really, I love that. An Irish guy and he said to me yeah, and if you do you'll be back. So you have to make a choice and at least I did and I primarily, for me it's not a choice at all. I want to be there for my kids and I want to make sure that my family's taken care of so I can forego the steak and now I eat Salmon and I eat filet of sole and all of the things that we were supposed to eat on Fridays when we were kids and we didn't.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right. Even when you were getting chemotherapy you continued to exercise and ride your bike when you didn't have the strength to do it. Talk about those hardest days when you pushed yourself out there thinking it was going to make a difference?

PAUL STEWART: I had a one-year old. Less than a one-year old. Three or four month old. Just to go from my front door to the first telephone pole on my street was a challenge. I couldn't go out in the sun because I was on chemo. I had a catheter in my chest. I was getting chemo in doses 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It was debilitating. It was tiring. It was draining. It was constant. It took a lot of force and will. I think of guys and people, my neighbors, my friends, my next door neighbor. She was an oncology nurse, came over every day and changed the dressings for me. Katie Duggan and I think of Mike Barnacle who was my neighbor who came over every day and visited with me. I think of Johnny Olson who recently was challenged with prostate cancer and he was my physical conditioning coach and he came by my house every day and made sure I got up.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's not just the internal spirit and the determination and a loving family but really your extended family and friends.

PAUL STEWART: You need people because you gather strength from their energy. You almost are in a situation where you don't want to disappoint them. Being a professional athlete as I was, I was always used to the performance and putting on the show in front of people and you don't want to do something that disappoints people and also your own level of professionalism. Your own level of integrity. Then I kept looking down at that bassinet with that little boy in it and I said to myself I've got to keep trying harder. If I had to forego steak and roast beef and things like that and eat a lot of carrots and broccoli and you know what, I can get by.

JEANNE BLAKE: You said it was tough to even get to the telephone pole at the corner but you jumped on your bike and would ride for miles?

PAUL STEWART: I did. It was building up. I would go out after the sun went down and I could walk and I would take the stroller and push as far as I could go and then I would sit and rest and then I would turn around and go home. Each day I tried to go a little further and a little further. I got to that point where I eventually, I have a home in Hyannisport, not the biggest house, it's a nice little house and I'd just get to the point where I could get out to the beach and then we would sit on the beach and play in the water and have some fun. It got to be a goal and I'm a guy that's goal orientated.

JEANNE BLAKE: Let's talk about the symptoms and put them on the screen. I want you to talk about these. Consult a doctor. The American Cancer Society says if there's a change in bowel habits. Blood that's bright red or very dark in the stool. Diarrhea, constipation or feeling that the bowel doesn't empty completely. Stools that are narrower than usual. Frequent gas pains. Bloating, fullness or cramps. Weight loss for no reason. Very tired, vomiting. You had all of those symptoms.

PAUL STEWART: All of those symptoms and of course I was on the road twenty days out of thirty every month in Montreal, Chicago and Detroit and all of the cities that the NHL plays in. I always thought that I was a little tired from traveling and fatigue. There's one other thing. If you have an idea if there's familial history. If there's a chance that there was colon cancer in your family, your chances of having it are more so. The other thing is that you should examine what type of diet you've had over the course of time and if you smoke. Smoking adds to your chances of having this disease. If you can get to a point where you have colonoscopy and they say now the insurance companies and they do it by numbers statistically. More people after 50 have colon cancer but what about the guy like me that was 43. What about the guy like Jay Monahan that was 42, Katie Couric's husband. Vince Lombardi,

Charles Shultz, Ruth Beta Ginsberg, all these people had colon cancer and they're all smart and certainly financially able to get the best medical advice. Guess what? We didn't know we were sick.

JEANNE BLAKE: Did you have a familial history a family history?

PAUL STEWART: My mother's side of the family. My grandmother, my aunt and my uncle on my mother's side all had it. Another cousin had it. But the Irish, well what did they die from? Consumption. What were they consuming Jamesons?

JEANNE BLAKE: It's always a safe bet.

PAUL STEWART: You know what, the Irish, we didn't talk about we were sick.

JEANNE BLAKE: This is my point.

PAUL STEWART: We need to expose this.

JEANNE BLAKE: Katie Couric did a great job in getting people to have colonoscopies. I remember a campaign.

PAUL STEWART: Two women saved my life. Katie Couric and my wife Laurie. One elbowed me in the chest to get me going and the other had the courage in her terrible times to think of everyone else.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right.

PAUL STEWART: That's why when people criticize her I take it personally because she's a friend of mine.

JEANNE BLAKE: You bet.

PAUL STEWART: So tell me. There are people who will put off, I've met people in the last month by the way that had passed the age of 50. You were talking about people at a younger age. Past the age of 50 and still haven't gotten a colonoscopy. A lot of it is about denial. I don't want to know.

PAUL STEWART: It's that. I have cousins with the same grandmother and same aunts and cousins and uncle and they won't go. Part of it is it's the embarrassment of thinking that someone is going to put a telescope or a tube up your back side and what they're going to see. You know what, they give you a little shot, you fall asleep, you wake up 15 minutes later and there's really nothing to it. The most difficult part is the two days prior where you have to watch what you eat and then you have to take a diuretic or something so that you're cleaned out. Basically that's it. You know what? Don't die from embarrassment because that's really what you're talking about and second of all, with colon cancer all your problems once you have the test are behind you.

JEANNE BLAKE: Very good Paul. I can always count on you for the good one-liner. Have you had the opportunity to talk with people who are resisting? What do you say to your cousins? With the force of nature that you are, how do they not get a colonoscopy?

PAUL STEWART: Occasionally what I do is I go through, if I'm out, and a lot of my cousins live right in my neighborhood. My one cousin's a builder and we all bought houses in the same neighborhood and they'll see that 14 inch scar on my stomach and my chest and that's a reminder. Or

the other thing is that they see me on television espousing that we should all be checked. You can only take them so far and it's like everything else. We know smoking's no good for us. The Government puts it in the side of the packages and certainly all of the medical people have talked about this but yet we still smoke.

JEANNE BLAKE: I'm not excusing it. My dad died from smoking related cancer but that once someone's addicted, it's different than the denial that allows one to say, I'll get a colonoscopy, I'll make the appointment later.

PAUL STEWART: Exactly. What they do is they gamble.

JEANNE BLAKE: They're gambling.

PAUL STEWART: You don't have to go to Foxwoods or you don't have to wait for the State of Massachusetts to build a casino down on Middleborough, guess what, every day that you go by without having the test, it's the same for prostate exam, it's a simple blood test, the PSA test. What you're doing is you're gambling. What you're really doing and I told this to a friend of mine who smoked, never had a colonoscopy, never had his prostate checked, ate terribly. I turned around and I said to him, I guess you really don't like your daughter that much. I said because if you did you'd want to be there for her high school graduation. You'd want to be there when she goes out on her prom date. You'd want to be there when she's going down the aisle with that person that she marries. You want to be there for her children and you know what, I guess you don't really care that much. You only care about yourself.

JEANNE BLAKE: His response?

PAUL STEWART: He said, you're right, I'm a coward.

JEANNE BLAKE: Did he follow up?

PAUL STEWART: He did follow up. I could shame him into it.

JEANNE BLAKE: Is he okay?

PAUL STEWART: He's my accountant so he better figure it out.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay Paul. That's an important note. Anybody that's listening can head those words of wisdom. I want to thank you for coming and sharing your incredibly powerful story and for the work that you do to continue raising awareness in funds for research.

PAUL STEWART: It's not my work at all what it is is it's the right thing to do and it goes back to the people who are watching this. All of the people who I know and those that I don't that are part of my life at games that I see in the street, you know what? I owe you, that's why I'm here.

JEANNE BLAKE: Thank you for that. We want to thank you for joining us on this edition of *About Health TV*. We appreciate your joining us. I'm Jeanne Blake and I'll see you next time.