



Eric Gregory, President of the Kentucky Distillers' Association, is shown July 8. He had his first colonoscopy at age 35, which found precancerous polyps. He's a big supporter of Kentucky House Bill 421, which reduces the financial and age barriers for colon cancer screening. MICHAEL CLEVINGER/ COURIER JOURNAL

The Bluegrass State saw an estimated 2,580 new cases of colon cancer and 900 deaths in 2025

Source: The American Cancer Society



How prevalent is colon cancer?

Health experts estimate there will be 108,860 new cases of colon cancer in the United States in 2026, in addition to 49,990 new cases of rectal cancer in the same time period. Colorectal cancer is expected to cause about 55,230 deaths in the United States during 2026. The national death rate from colorectal cancer has been dropping by about 1.5% per year in older adults during the past decade. One possible reason, experts say, is that colorectal polyps are now being found more often by advance screening and removed before they can develop into cancer.

Source: The American Cancer Society

comes with discussing anything that might occur during a bathroom break.

“A stigma is there, anxiety is there,” Asgarian said. “We don’t talk about it. Think about all the things we’ve done to get people to stop smoking ... breast cancer awareness is phenomenal. Yes, this one is the one that (awareness) is lagging a little bit.”

The day-long prep before a colonoscopy has also earned a dreadful reputation between chugging laxatives to help cleanse the colon, and the fasting the test requires. The law’s mandate to cover modern bowel preps can help here, too.

Few patients complain about the colonoscopy itself, because anesthesia or sedation keeps them from remembering the part where the camera enters the colon and removes the polyps, which are growths linked to cancer. It usually requires two days off work for anyone employed during traditional business hours.

It’s often viewed as more of an inconvenience than a necessity, but for people like Gregory with a family history – it’s a lifesaver.

His first colonoscopy at age 35 found precancerous polyps, and they were so concerning he’s needed another colonoscopy roughly every two years since.

“I’m a big believer in screenings and whatever you can do to prevent it,” Gregory said. “Because I saw what my dad went through and it was bad.”

Jones hopes that colonoscopies eventually become as commonplace as mammograms are for women.

Through education, media campaigns, and survivor support, as well as collaboration among public health, primary care, endoscopy practices and policymakers, the Colon Cancer Prevention Project’s data shows the organization has reduced colon cancer incidents and death in Kentucky by about 30% over the past 20 years. Thanks to the organization, about 640 Kentuckians who might not have had a colonoscopy otherwise, had dangerous growths removed during the test, which prevents cancer.

Another 270 Kentuckians ultimately survived because they caught their colon cancer early enough to receive effective treatment. That translates into about \$67 million in treatment cost reductions annually, Jones said.

If colorectal cancer and prevention could have the same boost of awareness that breast cancer saw at the end of the 20th century, reasonably it would lose its title as the No. 2 cancer killer in the country.

Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that in 2023, 80% of adults were up to date with their annual mammogram, whereas only 64.7% of adults were up to date with colorectal cancer screening.

“The tough part about screening is you’re looking for people who don’t have signs and symptoms,” Asgarian said. “Their physician is recommending that they get screened, and they’re thinking, ‘Well, I feel fine, doc.’”

How many cases of colon cancer arise without a family history?

Creating resources for patients with a family history is only half of the equation in reducing colorectal cases and deaths.

“Fifty percent of young colon cancer comes out of left field,” Jones said.

Rep. Amy Neighbors, R-Edmonton, who sponsored House Bill 421, knows this all too well. Her colon cancer symptoms began with uncomfortable issues in the restroom in late 2015 at age 39 – about six years before it was time for her first routine colonoscopy.

The bathroom woes progressed to extreme pain in her lower left abdomen, and sometimes it would hurt so bad it almost made her double over. Her doctor initially treated her for a virus, then irritable bowel syndrome. Neighbors was relatively active and tried to maintain a healthy diet. She didn’t have a family history of colon cancer, and candidly, she didn’t really know anything about it. Eventually, her doctor sent her for a colonoscopy.

“Being 39 years old at that time, obviously it never crossed my mind that I could have colon cancer,” Neighbors said.

When the test came back positive, she was stunned. All those bathroom problems had manifested from stage three colon cancer. She met with a surgeon in Nashville, who ultimately removed eight inches of her colon and 26 lymph nodes. She went through chemotherapy treatments every two weeks for six months.

Given her young age and lack of family history, the legislation she spearheaded wouldn’t have caught her colon cancer any earlier. But the new law can help her children, who are now considered “high-risk” due to her diagnosis. Under the current preventable guidelines, they’ll need to have their first colonoscopies around their 30th birthdays.

“I have to think, maybe this is why I survived,” Neighbors said. “Maybe God had a bigger plan for me. I like to think that he put me through that experience and put me in this position now so that I can help others.”

Gregory, too, is already thinking about how he’ll wish his young adult daughters a happy 35th birthday.

He was 18 years old when his father needed part of his colon removed, and at that point in his life, 35 seemed eons away.

Now he’s 59, just one year younger, and in much better medical shape, than his father was when he died at 60.

He hasn’t had to suffer the way his father did. With the help of this new legislation, his daughters won’t either.

“They know that they’re going to get a phone call the morning of their 35th birthday,” Gregory said. “And just like my mom did to me, and I’m going to be on the other line saying, ‘have you gotten your colonoscopy yet?’ ”

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The Cancer Research Institute estimates nationally about 1 in 25 men and 1 in 26 women will develop colorectal cancer at some point in their lifetime.