Cancer: My Non-HIV Bogeyman

March 23, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

In my body's fight against HIV, I believe that my genes more than anything have helped me withstand its never-ending onslaught. Unfortunately, my genes also contain predispositions to diseases such as diabetes and cancer.

Diabetes is a major concern for me, but cancer is my bogeyman. With diabetes, I'll probably have advance warning. With cancer, it probably won't be so polite.

Numerous family members have died from cancer of various types. However, I'm mostly concerned about colorectal cancer. My dad had it. Thankfully, it was detected and removed very early with no recurrence. My mom has lifelong gastrointestinal issues, mostly related to acid reflux. I'm also a lifelong acid reflux guy, which has ruined my enjoyment of many a spicy yet otherwise delicious meal.

What heightens my concern the most about colorectal cancer is that I had a colonoscopy years ago and had several polyps removed. Polyps, wouldn't you know, run in the family. They were "abnormal" and large. The bad news about polyps is that although they are usually benign, it's believed that they have the potential to eventually become malignant. So, I don't believe that I'm being totally irrational in my concern.

According to the American Cancer Society, more than 90 percent of colorectal cancer cases are in people age 50 and older. That's why they recommend regular testing for the 50 and over crowd. I'm not in that demographic yet, but my genes and my HIV combined have given my health care providers enough concern to be vigilant.

I'm scheduled to have a follow up colonoscopy next month and I'm not looking forward to it. Preparation for the procedure is infamously hideous, but that's not the worst of it for me. I've avoided this follow up for various reasons over the years, but I must admit my fear of the results has been the biggest obstacle.

At last, there's no place left for me to hide. Such are the blessings of long-term survival from HIV, which allow me to experience the uncertainties that we all confront as we age. Thank goodness for such a happy problem.

Visit the American Cancer Society for more information about colorectal cancer.

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