Are you 50? Time to get tested and prevent colorectal cancer

When she was 55 years old, Valerie B. made a promise to a total stranger. It may have saved her life.

"I was sitting in the doctor's office for a mammogram," the Atlanta woman says. "A lady there said she recently learned she had colon cancer. I knew nothing about it; nobody had ever told me to go get a colon test done. That woman in the doctor's office urged me to get tested. I promised her I would. And I did."

She made an appointment right away. During the test, Valerie's doctor found and removed six polyps (abnormal growths) in her colon. Three were precancerous, meaning there was a good chance they could have turned into cancer if they had not been removed. "The doctor was really glad I was there," she says. "He said 'Why did you wait so long?'"

Screening is recommended for men and women beginning at age 50 and continuing until age 75. Among men and women combined, colorectal cancer is the second leading cancer killer in the United States. But it doesn't have to be. Screening helps prevent the disease by finding polyps, so they can be removed before they turn into cancer. Polyps don't always cause symptoms, so you may not know you have them. That is why getting a screening test is so important.

For 52-year-old Randy Talley, the path to screening was different, but the results were similar. His doctor strongly recommended that he get checked for colorectal cancer when he was 50. Polyps ran in his family—his mother had them—

and both Randy and his mother had irritable bowel syndrome, a condition that can raise a person's risk of getting colorectal cancer. Plus, he was at the age when screening is recommended.

It turned out that Randy had five polyps, all in an early, noncancerous stage. They were removed. "This testing is recommended for a good reason," the Washington, DC, resident says. "You either experience a little discomfort with the test now, or you could face something a lot worse later in life, if you get colon cancer. So if you're 50 or older, my advice is to get screened now. I am completely glad I got screened."

There are several screening tests: colonoscopy, high-sensitivity fecal occult blood testing, and sigmoidoscopy. If you're 50 or older, talk to your doctor about which is right for you.

Valerie, now 60, is a cheerleader for getting screened. "After my colonoscopy, all I did that year was talk to people and tell my story. I found that five family members over 50 weren't tested. I begged them to go, and they all went."

Most insurance plans and Medicare cover screening without a deductible or co-pay.

To learn more about colorectal cancer and screening, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Web site for *Screen for Life: National Colorectal Cancer Action Campaign* at www.cdc.gov/ScreenForLife.