

LENDING HER

VOICE

Hearing more people talking about colon cancer screenings is music to Anne Murray's ears

BY AMY LYNN SMITH

The minute she starts speaking you think, “I know that voice.” After all, Anne Murray has one of the most familiar and distinctive voices in Canada and beyond.

But she’s not lifting her voice in song. Today, Murray is giving her voice to a new passion: talking about colon cancer awareness.

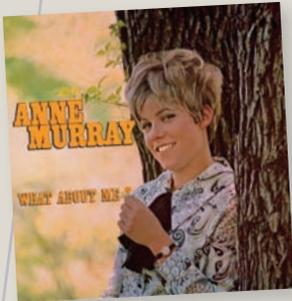
When she retired after an enormously successful music career, Murray knew she wanted to spend much of her time helping charities raise their profiles. One of the organizations she chose to support is Colon Cancer Canada.

“I have a history of colon cancer in my family,” Murray says. “My grandmother was a colon cancer survivor, and I had an aunt who died of colon cancer.”

Murray also lost her dear friend and manager of 25 years, Leonard Rambeau, to colon cancer. “He ignored symptoms, and by the time they discovered it, it was just too late,” she says. “He was only in his 40s, with a wife and three young children. Very, very sad.”



CAREER HIGHLIGHTS



1968

Murray records her first album, *What About Me*.

1970

"Snowbird" becomes one of the most popular songs in North America.



1983

She brings home her fourth Grammy Award, after winning in 1974, 1978 and 1980.

2008

Murray receives special "hitmaker" honour from Songwriters Hall of Fame.

2012

Retired from performing, she is devoted to promoting charitable causes and healthy living.



TUNE IN TO THE FACTS

According to the Canadian Cancer Society, roughly 22,200 Canadians were expected to be diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 2011. It was estimated that 8,900 would die of the disease. Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of death from cancer in men and women combined, the society says.

Fortunately, colon cancer is highly treatable—and even preventable—if caught early enough.

"With a lot of cancer screenings, what we're trying to do is reduce death from the disease," says Dr. Heather Bryant, vice president of Cancer Control for the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer. "But with colorectal cancer, you can lower your risk of developing the disease in the first place."

For most cases of colorectal cancer, there's a long precancerous phase when polyps (growths) form, she explains. When precancerous polyps are found and removed during that phase, they can't develop into cancer.

"If you can avoid developing the disease, that's the best thing," Bryant says. "But screening can also find cancer at an early stage, when the treatment is much better and less invasive."

That's why she, Murray and other advocates across Canada have an important message to share: Get screened.

NOTABLE PASSION

Born in 1945 in Springhill, Nova Scotia, Murray began singing at age 7. By 1969, she had released her second album, which yielded her first hit single, "Snowbird." The tune became one of the most popular songs in North America in 1970, and earned Murray the first American gold record awarded to a solo Canadian female singer.

During her career, Murray sold more than 54 million albums. She earned four Grammy Awards, two American Music Awards and 15 Juno Awards, and was inducted into the Juno Hall of Fame in 1993. Numerous other honours include stars on Canada's Walk of Fame and the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Known to many as "Canada's Songbird," Murray paved the way for many other Canadian female vocalists to become international superstars, including Celine Dion, Shania Twain, k.d. lang, Alanis Morissette and Sarah McLachlan. But she remains humble about her success.

“Singing was such a passion that I just knew I had to do it, but I didn’t know what form it would take,” she says. “I certainly didn’t think it would turn into a 40-year career—I didn’t think that was possible.”

As grateful as she is for the opportunities she has had, Murray is firmly committed to retirement. “It was years of hard work,” she says. “That work is done, but I will continue with my charitable involvement and other commitments.”

SPEAKING THE TRUTH

When Murray agreed to lend her voice to the cause of fighting colon cancer, she meant it literally. She is an outspoken advocate in support of awareness, both of colon cancer itself and of the vital importance of early detection.

The Canadian Cancer Society recommends that men and women have a stool test at least every two years starting at age 50. But for people who have risk factors, such as a family history, Bryant says the first-line screening should be a colonoscopy.

Murray had her first colonoscopy at age 40 because of her family history. “I’ve had four colonoscopies so far and had some benign polyps removed,” she says. “It’s such a simple thing, and there’s nothing to it.”

By speaking out about her own experience, Murray hopes to reassure people that having a colonoscopy isn’t anything to be afraid of. “It’s better to do this than to die,” she says frankly. “Especially when there’s often no reason for that to happen.”

Murray also hopes to make people feel more comfortable talking about it. She admits this has never been a problem for her, having grown up in a family of doctors. “We used to have some dandy conversations at our dinner table,” she says with a laugh. “I don’t care what I talk about.”

In addition to speaking at events such as the Anne Murray Charity Golf Classic in support of Colon Cancer Canada, a fundraiser she spearheads every year, Murray has recorded public service announcements and appeared in awareness campaigns for the organization.

She also uses Facebook and Twitter (@annemurray1) to spread the word. “I hear back from people saying, ‘I finally had my colonoscopy,’” Murray says. “And you know what? I think that’s great.”

FOR THE RECORD

Screening Recommendations

The Canadian Cancer Society recommends that men and women 50 and older have a stool test (fecal occult blood test) or fecal immunochemical test at least every two years. If the test shows signs of possible cancer, a follow-up screening is needed. This could be a colonoscopy; an X-ray, known as double-contrast barium enema, of the large intestine; or a sigmoidoscopy, which is similar to a colonoscopy.

People at increased risk for developing colorectal cancer should talk to their doctor about the right screening tests and schedule for them, the Canadian Cancer Society says. Risk factors include:

- A parent, sibling or child with colorectal cancer, although it’s smart to tell your doctor about any family history
- Personal history of colorectal cancer
- An inflammatory bowel disease, such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn’s disease
- Benign polyps of the rectum or colon
- Certain inherited syndromes



LISTEN CAREFULLY

Being screened for colon cancer before symptoms appear is ideal. But it's also important to know the signs that something could be wrong.

According to Bryant, symptoms that could point to colon cancer include blood in the stool, frequent cramping or bloating, and a feeling of obstruction in the bowels. In other cases, the only symptom may be fatigue, especially if loss of blood into the stool is causing anemia.

But experts agree that keeping up with a doctor-recommended schedule of routine screenings is the best defence. Screening tests can reveal the presence of precancerous polyps or cancer long before symptoms appear.

If cancer is diagnosed, today's treatment options are better than ever. Bryant says the probability of surviving colorectal cancer more than five years has improved steadily in Canada during the past decade.

"That's very good news," she says. "It means the combination of the various advances in treatment have really resulted in a significant improvement in survival."

There are also preventive measures. Avoiding alcohol, maintaining a healthy weight, engaging in regular physical activity, and eating a diet that includes less red meat and more grains and vegetable-based products have all been linked to a lower risk of colorectal cancer, Bryant says.

A fit and youthful 66 years old, Murray certainly leads this kind of lifestyle. "I'm a fitness nut," she says, with aerobics and yoga among her regular activities. "I exercise five days a week and play golf four days a week."

Although Murray's fans may be disappointed to hear her say she doesn't plan to sing in public again, she's channelling her passion for singing into her charitable work.

In 2011, the Anne Murray Charity Golf Classic in support of Colon Cancer Canada raised \$180,000. This money helps fund cancer research, patient support, awareness campaigns and access to screening.

"It's my job to try to raise the profile and encourage as many people as I can to get tested," Murray says. "When I hear stories of people who died from colon cancer—especially when it's unnecessary—it's just heartbreaking. I want people to have long and productive lives." 

Find Your Voice

Not everyone is as comfortable talking about colon cancer screening as Anne Murray. But there are ways to make it easier next time you see your doctor.

"You can start the conversation by just saying to your doctor, 'I've heard about this test,'" says Dr. Heather Bryant, vice president of Cancer Control for the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer. "Then your doctor can give you an overview of what kinds of tests are most appropriate for you and your risk factors."

She says both patients and physicians are getting less shy about discussing colon cancer screenings—and she hopes the trend will continue.

Bryant urges people to talk not only to their doctors about colon cancer but to other people in their family, as well.

"We want to turn a conversation like this into a normal part of life," she says. "People didn't used to talk about mammography, and then it became a subject of comedy routines. We're trying to do the same thing now with colon cancer screenings. We want people to talk about it."

ONLINE

Keep Learning, Start Talking

Want to know more about colon cancer screening? Find facts, videos and other resources at the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer's Colonversation website: www.colonversation.ca.

