

Fighting Colon Cancer: One Man's Story

by Charles Downey

En Español (Spanish Version)



All-star baseball player Eric Davis survived colon cancer and now devotes much of his time to making the public aware of ways to guard against the disease.

Eric Davis' Story

One day in May 1997, just after Davis scored a run for the Baltimore Orioles, he returned to the dugout, sat down and found he could not get up again. Doubled over with pain in his stomach, the then 35-year-old called the team trainer.

"[The trainer] immediately noticed my stomach was swollen, took me out of the game and called the team physician," says Davis.

The doctor dismissed the swelling and Davis played again the following day, but later could not get out of bed. He was quickly admitted to a hospital, where doctors thought it might be some sort of an abscess. After five days without a firm diagnosis or questions to his answers, Davis checked into Johns Hopkins University Hospital where physician Keith Lillemoe, MD, soon detected a cancerous tumor about the size of an orange in Davis's colon. He had surgery the next day.

"Actually, I was relieved," says Davis. "For six days, I didn't know what was wrong, so the first thought in my mind was, 'Okay, let's go take care of it.' I didn't know anything about colon cancer then, but decided I was going to do everything in my power to beat it."

Coming Back

And beat it he did. Afterward, he became the first player ever to hit more than 30 home runs and steal fifty bases in a single season. Throughout his career, Davis has won almost every major award in baseball: World Series ring, Gold Glove for fielding, MVP for hitting and base stealing, and the Roberto Clemente Award for character and courage.

"I started working out again one month after the operation," Davis says. "Then, I started chemotherapy. I usually took chemo on a Tuesday, felt a little groggy until Thursday, and then was fine. I think eating while taking chemo helped."

He scheduled chemotherapy around workouts and games. He also cut down his consumption of alcohol and fatty and fried foods.

In September 1997, he returned to the ball field during the playoffs. Everyone was amazed at his progress, but the *coup de grâce* was when Davis hit a game-clinching home run against the Milwaukee Brewers—just one day after a chemotherapy session. The stand erupted in a five-minute standing ovation.

A Lesson in Anatomy

During his ordeal, Davis learned that the colon is the first 4-6 feet of the large intestine, while the rectum is the last 8-10 inches. Surgeons removed about three feet of Davis' colon, sparing the rectum. Now he often quips that he must schedule his meals around his games.

Taking Up the Cause

After that season, Davis, in conjunction with the American College of Gastroenterology, formed the public awareness campaign "Score Against Colon Cancer." During the 1998 baseball season, Davis gave press conferences about the importance of colorectal screening tests. Fans received pamphlets at 12 baseball parks. For the 1999 and 2000 seasons, 30 ballparks took part. The 2001 baseball season will again see Davis speaking out about colorectal cancer at all US ballparks.

"I was inspired to set up a foundation and start an awareness campaign because I felt blessed...and because I came back as a living example," he explains. "Because of what I went through, many more lives can be saved."

The Eric Davis Foundation raises money through special events like celebrity roasts and golf and bowling tournaments. Scholarships are awarded to people who have recovered from colon cancer. In addition, donations are raised for research in colon cancer and pediatric oncology.

Get Tested

"I hear from colorectal patients all the time," Davis says. "I tell them not to give up, that if they have a fight, they will find a way to overcome."

The Davis message: Screening tests aren't bad. Don't be afraid to have one.

RESOURCES:

American Cancer Society
<http://www.cancer.org>

American College of Gastroenterology
<http://www.acg.gi.org>

Colorectal Cancer Network
<http://www.colorectal-cancer.net>