



Val Todorovic enjoys a lighthearted moment in the kitchen with her daughter Jelena Premoric. Four years after surgery and treatment for advanced colon cancer, Todorovic is showing no signs of the disease.

Together with You, We're Saving Lives

It's considered one of most preventable cancers with proper screening and evaluation, yet colorectal cancer remains the second leading cause of death from cancer in the United States. Patient Yolanda Woolridge shares her story in a video on how screening colonoscopy saved her life. Tune in at northshore.org/yolandasstory.



WATCH A VIDEO

Life Lesson

Colon Cancer Scare Turns Younger Survivor into Advocate

By Brian Justice

With a husband, three children and a thriving commercial cleaning business, Vladanka “Val” Todorovic of Elmhurst has a lot on her plate. Her super busy life got even more complicated when the 44-year-old Todorovic developed a set of persistent gastrointestinal (GI) issues.

“It made my life much more worrisome,” she recalled. “Initially, I thought stress or maybe a new diet was affecting my intestines and my stomach.”

WARNING SIGNS

As Todorovic’s bouts of nausea, constipation and diarrhea became more frequent and severe, she finally sought help. Her primary care physician encouraged her not to delay care and connected her to NorthShore Gastroenterologist Laura Bianchi, MD, who specializes in women’s GI health.

“We talked candidly about the changes Val noticed in her bowel habits,” Dr. Bianchi explained. “It’s not uncommon for younger adults like Val to minimize symptoms, which can lead to a delay in diagnosis. Based on the continuing severe symptoms, I felt it was critical to get her in for a colonoscopy and upper endoscopy so we could evaluate things further.”

The diagnostic procedures led to a dangerous discovery: Todorovic had colon cancer. Dr. Bianchi acted quickly, partnering with Colorectal Surgeon Joseph Muldoon, MD, and Medical Oncologist Matthew Adess, MD,

to develop a comprehensive treatment plan. The collaborative team first scheduled surgery to remove 12 inches of Todorovic’s colon, followed by six months of chemotherapy. All three NorthShore specialists hold academic appointments at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine.

ALARMING TREND

Todorovic’s health scare unfortunately is not that surprising. While the United States colon cancer rate is dropping among people age 65 and older, it is rising in younger age groups, according to the American Cancer Society (ACS). In 2020, 12% of new cases were diagnosed in people under age 50. It prompted ACS to lower its age guidelines for colonoscopies from 50 to 45.

“Most cancer screening tests are focused on early detection, and it’s important to remember that colon cancer is preventable,” added Dr. Bianchi. “Removing polyps during colonoscopy can prevent colon cancer before it develops. That’s why it’s truly the ‘gold standard’ for screening.”

Four years after her surgery and treatment, Todorovic’s life is back to normal and she expects to be pronounced cancer-free this year. She is quick to express gratitude for Dr. Bianchi and her team. “The NorthShore doctors and support staff do a great job! I’m so glad I went there, and they made me feel so comfortable. Because my life was so fast-paced and busy, I didn’t even think about cancer. I totally relied on their guidance and expertise.”

Based on her experience, Todorovic now eagerly encourages others not to delay seeking medical attention for unusual symptoms.

“I tell everyone that when they feel something different is going on in their body, go to the doctor. Don’t wait!”



“It’s important to remember that colon cancer is preventable,” advised Gastroenterologist Dr. Laura Bianchi.

Your Early Detection Connection

Along with lifesaving screening colonoscopies and other colon cancer tests, NorthShore is here to serve you through either telehealth visits or in-person appointments. Call (847) 492-5700 (Ext. 1264) or go online to learn more at northshore.org/d11.