

Beware of Possums, or Not

As unlikely as it sounds, getting bitten by a possum may have saved my husband's life.

One night in August 2006, my husband Charlie and I were relaxing in our family room watching TV.

Suddenly our dog Dixie began barking excitably. We could tell by her tenacious barking that she had tracked something. Charlie went outside to investigate and discovered Dixie had cornered a possum. Wanting to avoid a bloody carnage, Charlie thought he would simply remove the trespasser. As he grabbed the possum by the tail, it abruptly turned and bit him on the right wrist. He tossed it towards the woods so it could make its escape, and thought that would be the end of the story.

He did not treat the bite or mention to me that he had been bitten. Six hours later he collapsed in the bathroom. We went to the emergency room, where he was diagnosed with a severely infected arm. As he was treating Charlie's arm, the ER physician explained that when a wild animal gets threatened or agitated, toxins build up in their saliva as a defense mechanism. These toxins were transferred to Charlie's arm via the bite.

As we were leaving the ER, the doctor yelled, "Mr. Meyer, do not play with wild animals; that's why they call them wild!" To which my husband replied, "I played with a possum. They are supposed to PLAY possum!"

The next day the infection and swelling in his arm had increased to the point there were breaks in the skin which were oozing. Charlie went to our family doctor, Dr. Dean Beckman. While in the office, Charlie mentioned to Dr. Beckman that he had hemorrhoids he would like to get treated. Dr. Beckman referred Charlie to Dr. Smith, a specialist in colorectal surgery.

Dr. Smith advised Charlie that before treating the hemorrhoids, he would need to perform a colonoscopy to rule out other possible causes for the bleeding. The subsequent diagnosis was transverse Colon Cancer.

A right colectomy was performed removing 18 inches of his large intestine. Lymph nodes were sent for examination to determine if the cancer had metastasized, and fortunately the results came back clear. Had this medical chain of events not occurred – the possum bite, ER treatment, follow-up exam, hemorrhoid discussion and colonoscopy – it is entirely plausible Charlie would have assumed the bleeding was due to hemorrhoids and ignored it. By the time his condition had deteriorated to the point he felt the need to seek medical care, the cancer would have been more advanced and possibly metastasized.

Moral of the story: if you have any of the warning signs of Colon Cancer – a change in bowel habits, blood in the stool, unexplained weight loss, constant fatigue, unexplained anemia, frequent abdominal discomfort, narrow stools or a feeling the bowel does not empty completely – don't wait until you get bitten by a possum to seek medical care!

As for Charlie, I've noticed that now when he drives, he will try to avoid hitting a possum –they might be kin to the one that saved his life!

Charles

Written by his wife Mary