Dear Fellow Colorectal Cancer Patient:

If you are reading this letter, you have recently been diagnosed with colorectal cancer. We have had the same type of cancer. To help other patients, we joined a group of health professionals to create the “Blue Ribbon” information kit. Royal blue is the colour of the colorectal cancer awareness ribbon – so it seemed right to name the kit the “Blue Ribbon” kit. If you prefer to read a paper copy of the kit, ask your Surgeon or Cancer Patient Navigator for the paper copy.

This is the first information kit you will be getting. Your Cancer Patient Navigator or another member of your health care team will give you another kit of general cancer information. The sheet titled “What is included in the “Blue Ribbon” kit?” lists the information included in this package and the general kit.

This kit has quite a bit of information about colorectal cancer. You do not have to read everything in this kit, just the parts that are useful to you, when you are ready. We encourage you to start by reading the short booklet “Understanding Colorectal Cancer” or “Support, Knowledge, Hope” which has more detailed information and includes questions you may want to ask your health care team.

We also want to share with you the 10 things we wished we had known before we started our treatment:

1. **Contact the Cancer Patient Navigator in your area** by calling toll-free 1-866-524-1234. The Navigator is an Oncology Nurse who can support you and your family throughout your treatment by coordinating your care, helping you to understand your diagnosis and treatment, and connecting you with helpful services in your community and at the Cancer Centre. Navigators are available in all areas of the province except the counties of Halifax and West Hants. If you live in these counties, ask your surgeon, nurse or family doctor about the support services available locally.

2. **Consider getting emotional support. You can ask for a referral for professional counselling** at any time during your treatment and recovery. Cancer Chat Canada also offers online support groups that are led by professionals, visit [www.cancerchatcanada.ca](http://www.cancerchatcanada.ca).

   **You can also contact a peer support service.** It can be a big help and comfort to talk to someone who has had colorectal cancer. The Canadian Cancer Society (1-888-939-3333) and the Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada (1-877-502-6566) can match you with a cancer survivor who has been through the treatments you are facing.

3. **Tell your family about your diagnosis.** Colorectal cancer can be prevented by screening. Tell your family members about your diagnosis so they can get the screening that is right for them.

4. **Consider an easy way to share information with your friends and family.** It can be tiring to keep people informed. And, it can be hard to keep repeating your story. Consider having someone to be your spokesperson. You might want to use an email group or social media. Telling children can be very difficult. Joan Hamilton’s book “When a Parent is Sick” can help you talk with your children. This book is available at the Cancer Centre and at most public libraries.

5. **Start planning now how you will manage your responsibilities.** Treatment and recovery can take up a lot of time. Think about what is most important to you. Decide what you want to keep doing and what you can have others do for you. If you work, talk to your manager about sick time and disability leave. It is best to know your options in advance.

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6. **Be reassured about the timing of your surgery.** If you have rectal cancer you will probably have chemotherapy and radiation before your surgery. If you have colon cancer, surgery will probably be your first treatment. Your surgeon will discuss your treatment plan with you.

7. **Ostomy Support.** Many colorectal patients will have a temporary or permanent ostomy after surgery. If one is needed, the surgeon will make a way for your bowel movements to come out of your belly where it will be collected in a disposable pouch. The new opening in your belly is called a stoma. After your surgery you will see an Enterostomal Therapy (ET) Nurse who will teach you how to care for your stoma and pouch. The ET Nurse will also provide you with prescriptions for your ostomy appliances. Please plan to see an ET nurse before your surgery. If you have an ostomy, you may be eligible for a Disability Tax Credit, ask your ET Nurse for more information. You may also want to contact the Ostomy Canada Society for support.

8. **You may prevent or manage some treatment side effects:**
   - **If you are having chemotherapy, consider going to the dentist before treatment begins.** The chemotherapy used for colorectal cancer can cause mouth problems. Due to the risk of infection, you might not be allowed to get dental work once treatment has started. If you see a dentist before treatment starts, dentists can take action to reduce the risk of mouth problems.
   - **Consider seeing a dietitian.** It is good to see a dietitian before, during and after treatment. What you are advised to eat may change during your treatment. Many problems can be prevented or reduced by following the right diet.
   - **Ask your health care team how to prevent and manage sexual health changes.** Treatment for colorectal cancer can affect your sexuality and intimate relationships. Although it may be difficult to talk about, it is important to ask for help with sexual health changes. For women who have had pelvic radiation, sex and pelvic exams can become difficult – ask about using vaginal dilators. Men who have had rectal surgery may have changes in the ability to get or maintain an erection - ask about approaches that may help you.
   - **Exercise.** Regular exercise can help fight fatigue and improve recovery. You may not always feel like exercising, but even taking frequent short walks will be good for you.
   - **Ask your surgeon if you are at risk of developing low anterior resection syndrome (LARS).** LARS is a change in bowel habits that may occur after surgery for rectal cancer. LARS includes a wide range of issues that can have a great impact on people’s quality of life.

9. **Keep all your receipts.** Keep receipts for everything related to your care, including food and parking. You will need them at tax time.

10. **Consider genetic assessment.** Sometimes cancer runs in families. If you have relatives who have also had colorectal cancer, genetic counselling may be right for you. Getting an appointment can take many months; ask your doctor about a referral as soon as possible.

We wish you all the best with your treatment. Although it is a long road, there are many people who can help you and your family. You are not alone.

Sincerely,

Robin McGee  
Colorectal Cancer Survivor

Debbie MacIntyre  
Colorectal Cancer Survivor

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