

# Former Rockette Jennifer Jones Wishes She Had Had a Colonoscopy at Age 45 [VIDEO]

The pioneering Black dancer and colon cancer survivor is enthusiastic about new guidelines to start colorectal screening at age 45.

May 24, 2021 By Bob Barnett

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Jennifer Jones, 53, a colon cancer survivor who was diagnosed with Stage III [colon cancer](#) at age 50, might have had a different personal health story if the newly revised United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) guidelines stating that people at average risk should get [screened for colon and rectal cancer starting at age 45](#) had been in effect eight years ago—when she was 45.

“When I was 45, I had an established job, with benefits,” recalls Jones. “If the guidelines had been 45 at the time, I would have gone [to get a colonoscopy].” A [colonoscopy](#) can not only detect evidence of colon cancer but also of precursors, such as polyps, that can be removed, in many cases preventing cancer from occurring in the first place. If she had had evidence of cancer or potentially precancerous polyps at the time, she says, “they could have detected something.” And if they had done so, determining that she was at high risk, she would not only have been scheduled for more frequent colonoscopies, but she also would have been particularly alert to possible symptoms.

Jones, who in 1987 became the first Black woman to dance with the Radio City Rockettes and went on to become a celebrated Broadway dancer who performed in the Tony Award-winning musical *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* in 2001, is a lifelong runner and had been a vegetarian for most of her life. When she was 7, growing up in New Jersey, she and her dad would run on the beach early in the mornings and then swim in the ocean. (The story of her intensive treatment and recovery is the subject of a 2019 feature in our sister magazine Real Health, [“Still Dancing.”](#))

So she had no reason to believe she was at particular risk for colorectal cancer. Her cancer was nonhereditary, so it was not related to her genetics, and most people who get colorectal cancer are still over 50. However, in the last few decades, both the [incidence and mortality of the disease has been rising sharply in people under 50](#), particularly in people 40 to 49 years old. The new screening guidelines have been a long time coming. In 2018, the American Cancer Society called

for screening for people at average risk to start at age 45. The USPTF drafted the [new recommendation in October 2020](#) and formally made the [recommendation](#) in May 2021.

Jones, who was diagnosed in 2017 and completed several courses of chemotherapy before having surgery in early 2019, is now two years out from her successful treatment. “After I was diagnosed cancer-free,” she recalls, “I needed to go to the mountaintops and scream, ‘You need to get a colonoscopy now!’” If you’re reluctant to get a colonoscopy, that’s fine, she says, “but you have to get screened.” (To learn more about screening options, including at-home stool tests and virtual colonoscopies, see this [article](#) from the Colon Cancer Foundation.)

To get the word out about colon and rectal cancer screening and to help others who are newly diagnosed, Jones connected with the [Colorectal Cancer Alliance](#) in March 2019. She is particularly committed to getting the word out to the [African-American community](#). “Colon cancer affects the African-American community more—we are 20% more likely to be diagnosed and 40% more likely to die,” she says.

Jones also serves as a “buddy” for newly diagnosed people with colon cancer. In March 2021, her story was highlighted in an episode of the Today show that led to a first virtual face-to-face meeting with a colon cancer survivor she had helped as a buddy:

These days, Jennifer Jones feels great, she says. “I’m not in treatment, I go for checkups every six months and I get a colonoscopy every year.” As a colon cancer survivor, she is at high risk, which is why an annual screening is recommended. “When I hit my two-year mark, my doctors were very pleased. Hopefully, my cancer is not coming back.”

She continues to lead a healthy lifestyle. “I’ve been vegetarian most of my life, and I also do juicing with raw vegetables. I continue to do wheatgrass shots two or three times a week. I notice that it gives me more energy.” When she counsels people newly diagnosed with colorectal cancer who try to blame their meat-eating ways for their cancer, she uses herself as an example to try to conquer the self-blame.

She maintains a lively routine. “I’m a runner, pretty much every day, and I meditate. I also do Pilates and yoga—before the pandemic, I was doing hot yoga and also going to the gym. Now I do weights at home, stretching exercises and, in the evening, walks after dinner. My body craves running and meditation. I don’t have any long-term side effects. I do feel like I’m back, although I had to relearn my body, especially after surgery. I’m not as limber as I used to be, but I’m OK with that.”

Jones is at work on a memoir about her experiences as the first Black Rockette and also plans to write another book about her cancer journey. She recently finished a children’s book, titled *The Story of Jennifer Jones, the First African-American Rockette*. It will be illustrated by Robert Paul Jr. and published by HarperCollins in the fall of 2022.

She has many stories to tell but none more pressing than the importance of early cancer

screening. She realizes that it's not always easy to convince people—she has yet to persuade her two sisters to get colorectal cancer screenings. But she keeps trying. “I'm hoping these guidelines will reach more people to get screened at a younger age,” she says. If colon cancer runs in your family, she recommends seeing your doctor, who may recommend colorectal cancer screening at an even earlier age. “Let's start conversations in our families,” she suggests. “Do you know anyone in your family who has had colon cancer?”

“We are seeing this disease in younger adults,” says Jones. “45 is the new 50.”

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