Intermountain® Healthcare

Colon Polyps

Colon polyps are a common condition. As many as 20% of people over age 50 have a colon polyp. Most polyps are harmless — but some can cause cancer. So if you're at risk for colon polyps, you should be examined. If you do have a polyp, the doctor will remove it and test it right away.

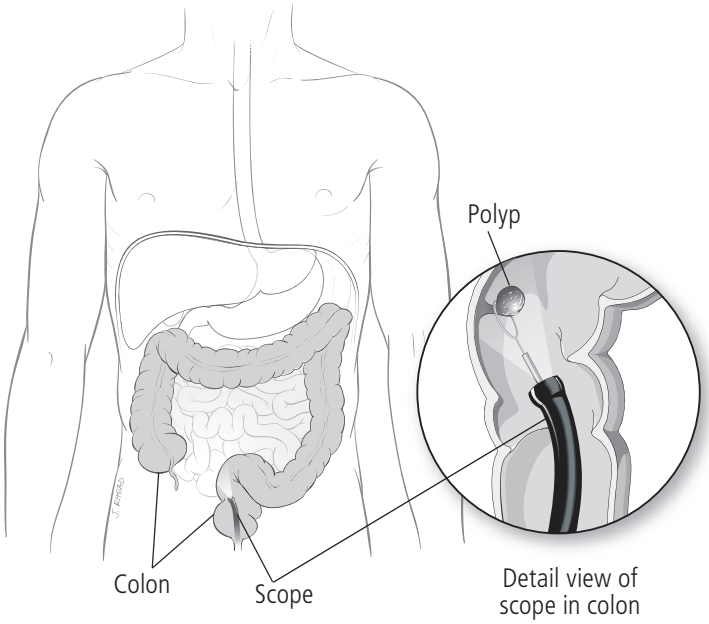
What is a colon polyp?

A colon polyp is an extra piece of tissue that grows from the lining of the colon (large intestine). It can be flat or mushroom-shaped, small or large. Most are harmless, but a few become cancerous. Once a polyp grows bigger than about ¼ inch, it's more likely to be cancerous.

What causes colon polyps — and who is at risk?

Polyps form when normal cells grow and divide in an abnormal way. They may create new cells when new cells aren't needed. Doctors don't always know why some people get polyps. But they do know who is at risk. Risk factors for colon polyps include:

- **Age.** Most people with polyps are over age 50.
- **Ethnicity.** African Americans have a higher rate of colon polyps than other ethnic groups.
- **Family history.** Polyps, colon cancer, or other diseases of the colon often run in the family.
- **Sedentary lifestyle.** Inactivity slows your digestion and waste stays in your colon longer. This may increase colon polyps.
- **Smoking and alcohol.** Smoking and drinking alcohol in excess both significantly increase your risk of colon polyps and cancer.
- **Obesity.** Being 30 pounds or more overweight encourages the growth of extra cells in the colon and rectum.
- **Inherited gene mutations.** Some rare inherited conditions can cause hundreds of polyps.



The **colon** (large intestine) is part of your digestive system. It's where your body absorbs water and nutrients from digested food — and then makes and stores stool (poop). **Polyps** are growths of tissue in the colon.

What are the symptoms?

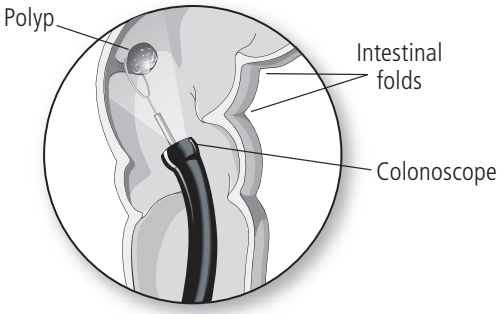
Most small polyps don't cause symptoms. Often people don't know they have a colon polyp until the doctor finds it during a checkup or when testing for something else. When symptoms do appear, they may be caused by colon polyps or by something else. If you have any of the symptoms below, call your doctor to find out what's causing them:

- **Rectal bleeding.** You may see blood in your underwear or on toilet paper after you've had a bowel movement.
- **Blood in your stool.** Blood can make stool look black, or it can show up as red streaks in your stool.
- **Abdominal pain.** A large polyp can obstruct your bowel and cause cramps and constipation.
- **Ongoing constipation or diarrhea.** Constipation or diarrhea that last more than a week could also indicate a bowel obstruction.

How does the doctor test for colon polyps?

To know if you have a colon polyp, the doctor needs to look inside your colon. Procedures to look inside your colon include:

- **Colonoscopy.** A long, flexible tube with a tiny video camera at the end is inserted through your rectum. The doctor can see the entire colon, and can remove most polyps to test for cancer.
- **Flexible sigmoidoscopy.** This is similar to colonoscopy, but only looks at the first part of your colon.
- **Virtual colonoscopy.** Using computer images and x-rays, the doctor creates a picture of the inside of your colon. The doctor can see the entire colon, but cannot remove abnormal tissue.
- **Barium enema.** The inside of your colon is coated with a contrast dye that helps abnormalities show up better on an x-ray. The doctor can see the entire colon, but cannot remove abnormal tissue.



How are colon polyps treated?

The only way for a doctor to know whether a polyp might become cancer is to look at it under a microscope. For this reason, doctors usually remove and test all polyps.

- Usually the doctor removes it during a sigmoidoscopy or a colonoscopy.
- If the polyp is too large or can't be reached safely, it may be removed with surgery through the abdomen.
- In rare cases, the doctor may perform an operation to remove your entire colon and rectum.

How can I prevent polyps?

You can greatly lower your risk of developing polyps if you:

- **Eat more calcium and folate.** These minerals have been shown to decrease the size and number of polyps. Foods rich in calcium include milk, cheese, and broccoli. Foods rich in folate include chickpeas, kidney beans, and spinach.
- **Eat less fat.** Especially limit saturated fats from animal sources such as red meat.
- **Eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.** Fiber moves food through your colon faster and reduces the amount of time your colon is exposed to any harmful substances.
- **Exercise every day.** Exercise also moves food through your colon faster.
- **Don't drink much alcohol.** Drinking more than one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men increases your risk of colon cancer.
- **Stop smoking.** If you can't stop smoking, then at least cut back.
- **Lose extra weight.** Fat encourages the growth of cells in the colon.

What if I don't treat my colon polyps?

If a polyp grows large, it could cause a bowel obstruction. And it could develop into colon cancer. Colon cancer is the third most common cause of cancer deaths — 50,000 people die of it every year. But most of these deaths can be prevented if the polyps are treated.

If you've had a colon polyp, you have a greater chance of having another one. Be SURE to have regular follow-up examinations. And follow the prevention steps above.

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