

Colon Polyps

What is a colon polyp?

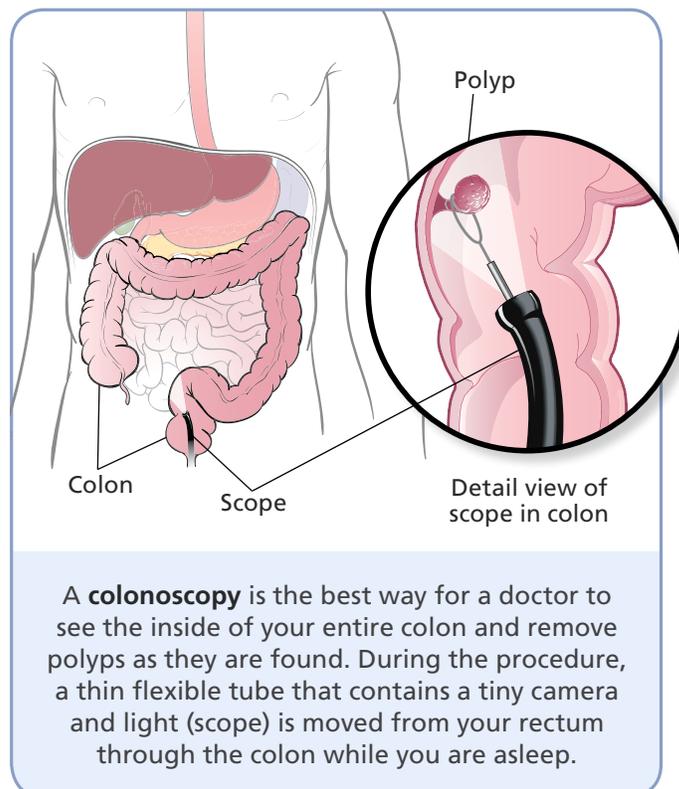
A colon polyp is an extra piece of tissue that grows from the lining of the colon (large intestine). Two out of every 10 people over the age of 50 have colon polyps.

Most polyps are called **hyperplastic** [hahy-per-PLAS-tik], which are harmless. Some, called **adenomas** [ad-n-OH-muhs], can cause cancer. Once a polyp grows bigger than about ¼ inch, it's more likely to be cancerous.

How do I know if I have polyps?

The only way to know if you have colon polyps is to look at the inside of your colon. Some ways to do this include:

- **Colonoscopy.** The doctor uses a long, flexible tube with a tiny video camera to look at your colon while you are asleep. This allows the doctor to see the entire colon and rectum and remove polyps to test for cancer at the same time. Removal doesn't hurt because the lining of the colon does not have nerves that sense pain.
- **Flexible sigmoidoscopy.** This is similar to colonoscopy, but only looks at the lower part of your colon and rectum.
- **Virtual colonoscopy.** The doctor creates a picture of the inside of your colon with computer images and x-rays. The doctor can see the entire colon, but cannot remove polyps.
- **Barium enema.** The inside of your colon is coated with a special dye that shows polyps or other abnormalities on an x-ray. The doctor can see abnormal tissue, but cannot take it out.



What causes colon polyps?

Polyps form when normal cells grow and divide in an unusual way. They may create new cells when new cells aren't needed.

Doctors don't exactly know what causes polyps to grow. However, there are some common risk factors among people who have polyps including:

- Eating a lot of red meat and fatty foods
- Not eating enough fiber
- Smoking cigarettes
- Drinking alcohol
- Being overweight or obese
- Being African American
- Having a family history of colon cancer
- Having an inherited gene mutation

How can I prevent polyps?

You can lower your risk of developing polyps if you:

- **Eat more foods that contain calcium and folate.** These minerals have been shown to decrease the size and number of polyps. Some foods with calcium include milk, cheese, and broccoli. Foods rich in folate include chickpeas, kidney beans, and spinach.
- **Eat less fat.** Limit saturated (solid) fats from animal sources such as red meat.
- **Eat more high-fiber foods such as 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 for at least 30 minutes every day.** Exercise helps food move through your colon faster.
- **Lose extra weight.** Excess fat cells encourage the growth of polyps in the colon.
- **Limit alcohol.** Women who have more than 1 drink a day, and men who have more than 2 drinks a day have a higher risk of colon cancer.
- **Stop smoking.** If you smoke, stop. Ask your healthcare provider for information on programs to help you quit.

How are colon polyps treated?

Polyps are removed during a colonoscopy or a sigmoidoscopy. If a polyp is too large or can't be reached safely, it may be taken out during open surgery (through the belly). In rare cases, the doctor may need to remove your entire colon and rectum.

If you have an adenoma, you have a higher risk (25% - 30%) of having more adenomas in the future. For this reason, you may need more frequent colonoscopies. Make a follow-up appointment to talk with your doctor about your treatment plan.

What if I don't treat my colon polyps?

Colon polyps that are not removed may cause symptoms. If you have any of the symptoms below, **call your doctor:**

- **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

Polyps that grow large may also turn into colon cancer. Colon cancer is the 3rd most common cause of cancer deaths (50,000 people die of it every year). Most of these deaths can be prevented if the polyps are treated.



My follow-up appointment

Date/Time: _____

Place: _____

Doctor: _____

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