

Colon Polyps

Checking for polyps can prevent cancer and may save your life. This information sheet is to help you learn about polyps and colon cancer.

What are polyps?

Polyps are tissue that grows from the lining of the colon or large bowel. They vary in size. Polyps can be as small as a tiny dot or grow to be several inches. We are not sure why polyps develop. Polyps are common. In the Western hemisphere, about 1 person out of 10 will develop significant polyps.

If I have polyps, do I have cancer?

Some large polyps can turn into cancer and some do not. Most polyps are benign. This means that they are not cancer. Some polyps, known as hyperplastic polyps do not turn into cancer. Some polyps are called adenomas. These types of polyps sometimes turn into cancer.

Polyps develop very slowly. It takes years for a polyp to grow. It takes 7 to 10 years for a cancer to develop from a polyp. **Removal of polyps can prevent colon cancer.**

By just looking at a polyp it is hard to tell its type or whether it will turn into cancer or not. To know what type of polyps you have, they are removed and sent to the lab for tests.

What causes polyps?

If your diet is high in fat and low in fibre, you may increase your chance of having polyps. Here are some other reasons you may develop polyps:

- there is colon cancer in your family (mom, dad, brothers, sisters)
- a close family member has polyps (mom, dad, brothers, sisters)

What increases my chance of cancer if I have polyps?

Your chance of cancer increases:

- with how large your polyps are
- with how many polyps you have
- with the type of polyps you have
- if there is a close family history of adenoma or colorectal cancer

How can I tell if I have polyps?

Polyps may cause bleeding from your colon or rectum. Rarely, polyps may block your colon. Most polyps are silent. You don't know you have them.

Having a colonoscopy is the best method of finding polyps. During a colonoscopy the polyps can be removed.

What is a colonoscopy?

A colonoscopy is an examination of the large intestine or bowel.

This examination uses a flexible telescope or tube which is inserted into your rectum and moved along the colon. This tube has a camera on the end of it which allows the doctor to see the colon directly on TV.

What happens after I have a polyp removed?

After a polyp is removed you may have a small amount of bleeding from your rectum. If excess bleeding occurs call your doctor immediately. Most patients receive sedation so you will not be able to drive, operate machinery, drink alcohol, or make major decisions for 24 hours. You can start eating normally after a colonoscopy.

How often do I need to have a colonoscopy?

If you have had 1 or more polyps you do have an increased chance of having more polyps in the future. For most patients having a colonoscopy about 3 to 5 years after the first polyp is removed is recommended.

If you have no further polyps another colonoscopy is needed every 5 to 10 years. It varies from person to person. It depends on the kind and number of polyps, and family history of polyps. Please ask your doctor about how often you should have a colonoscopy.

How are polyps removed?

This depends on the size of the polyp and the technique each doctor prefers. Some polyps are snipped off with a wire snare through the scope. Some are destroyed by an electric current through the scope. The electric current also closes the wound and prevents bleeding.

Some polyps are removed by putting a small metallic clip at the base of the polyp. Your doctor or nurse will tell you if you have metallic clips. Most clips fall off and come out in your bowel movements in about 3 to 14 days. If you have an MRI ordered, remind your health care provider that you had metallic clips applied for polyp removal. To be safe, you need to have an x-ray of your abdomen (belly) done to make sure the clips are gone.