

# What I need to know about Colon Polyps



NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH  
National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse



U.S. Department  
of Health and  
Human Services

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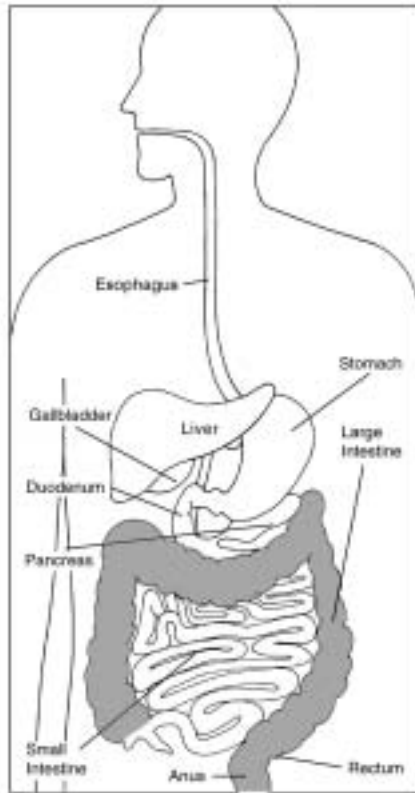
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## What are colon polyps?

A **polyp\*** is extra tissue that grows inside your body. Colon polyps grow in the **large intestine**. The large intestine, also called the colon, is part of your digestive system. It's a long, hollow tube at the end of your digestive tract where your body makes and stores **stool**.

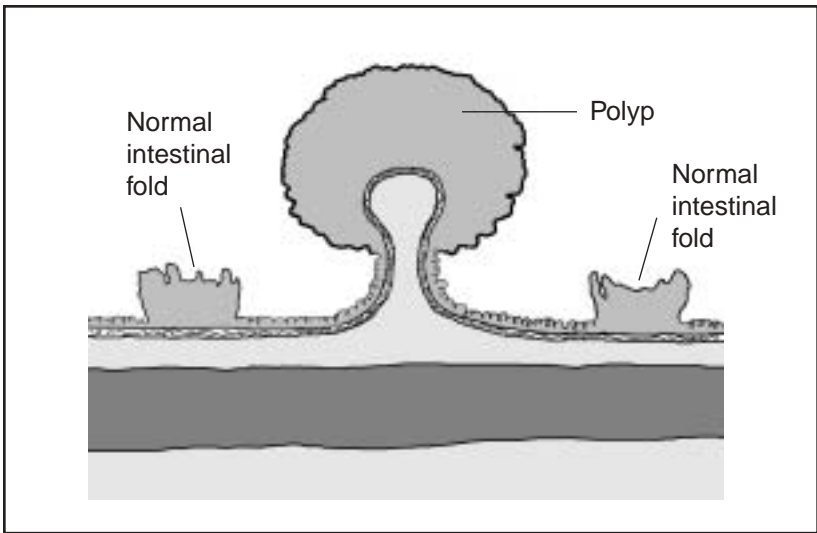


The digestive system

\*Words in **bold** type are defined in the glossary on page 12.

## Are polyps dangerous?

Most polyps are not dangerous. Most are **benign**, which means they are *not* cancer. But over time, some types of polyps can turn into cancer. Usually, polyps that are smaller than a pea aren't harmful. But larger polyps could someday become cancer or may already be cancer. To be safe, doctors remove all polyps and test them.



Colon polyp

## Who gets polyps?

Anyone can get polyps, but certain people are more likely than others. You may have a greater chance of getting polyps if

- you're over 50. The older you get, the more likely you are to develop polyps.
- you've had polyps before.
- someone in your family has had polyps.
- someone in your family has had cancer of the large intestine.

You may also be more likely to get polyps if you

- eat a lot of fatty foods
- smoke
- drink alcohol
- don't exercise
- weigh too much



Find out if someone in your family has had polyps.

## What are the symptoms?

Most small polyps don't cause symptoms. Often, people don't know they have one until the doctor finds it during a regular checkup or while testing them for something else.

But some people do have symptoms like these:

- bleeding from the **anus**. You might notice blood on your underwear or on toilet paper after you've had a bowel movement.
- constipation or diarrhea that lasts more than a week.
- blood in the stool. Blood can make stool look black, or it can show up as red streaks in the stool.

If you have any of these symptoms, see a doctor to find out what the problem is.

## How does the doctor test for polyps?

The doctor can use four tests to check for polyps:

- **Digital rectal exam.** The doctor wears gloves and checks your **rectum**, the last part of the large intestine, to see if it feels normal. This test would find polyps only in the rectum, so the doctor may need to do one of the other tests listed below to find polyps higher up in the intestine.
- **Barium enema.** The doctor puts a liquid called barium into your rectum before taking x rays of your large intestine. Barium makes your intestine look white in the pictures. Polyps are dark, so they're easy to see.



- **Sigmoidoscopy.** With this test, the doctor can see inside your large intestine. The doctor puts a thin flexible tube into your rectum. The device is called a sigmoidoscope, and it has a light and a tiny video camera in it. The doctor uses the sigmoidoscope to look at the last third of your large intestine.
- **Colonoscopy.** This test is like sigmoidoscopy, but the doctor looks at all of the large intestine. It usually requires sedation.



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Colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy testing

## Who should get tested for polyps?

Talk to your doctor about getting tested for polyps if

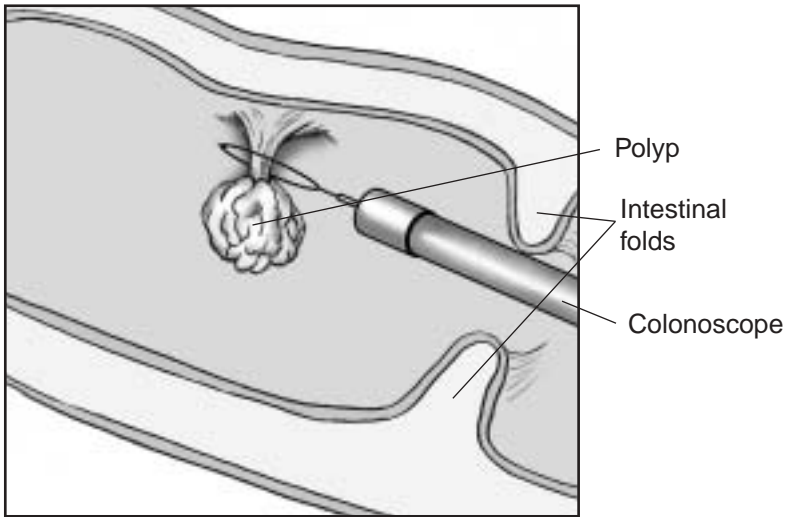
- you have symptoms
- you're 50 years old or older
- someone in your family has had polyps or colon cancer



## How are polyps treated?

The doctor will remove the polyp. Sometimes, the doctor takes it out during sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy. Or the doctor may decide to operate through the **abdomen**. The polyp is then tested for cancer.

If you've had polyps, the doctor may want you to get tested regularly in the future.



Polyp removal

## How can I prevent polyps?

Doctors don't know of any one sure way to prevent polyps. But you might be able to lower your risk of getting them if you

- eat more fruits and vegetables and less fatty food
- don't smoke
- avoid alcohol
- exercise every day
- lose weight if you're overweight

Eating more calcium and folate can also lower your risk of getting polyps. Some foods that are rich in calcium are milk, cheese, and broccoli. Some foods that are rich in folate are chickpeas, kidney beans, and spinach.

Some doctors think that aspirin might help prevent polyps. Studies are under way.



## Points to Remember

- A polyp is extra tissue that grows inside the body. Most polyps are not harmful.
- Symptoms may include constipation or diarrhea for more than a week or blood on your underwear, on toilet paper, or in your stool.
- Many polyps do not cause symptoms.
- Doctors remove all polyps and test them for cancer.
- Talk to your doctor about getting tested for polyps if
  - you have any symptoms
  - you're 50 years old or older
  - someone in your family has had polyps or colon cancer

## For More Information

### **American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons**

85 West Algonquin Road, Suite 550

Arlington Heights, IL 60005

Phone: (847) 290-9184

Email: [ascrs@fascrs.org](mailto:ascrs@fascrs.org)

Internet: [www.fascrs.org](http://www.fascrs.org)

### **National Cancer Institute**

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Phone: 1-800-422-6237 or (301) 496-6631

Internet: [www.nci.nih.gov](http://www.nci.nih.gov)

## Glossary

**Abdomen** (AB-doh-men): The area between the chest and the hips. It contains the stomach, small intestine, large intestine, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, and spleen.

**Anus** (AY-nus): The opening through which stool leaves the body.

**Benign** (buh-NINE): Not cancerous.

**Colonoscopy** (koh-luh-NAW-skuh-pee): A test to look inside the entire large intestine. The doctor uses a flexible tube that contains a light and a tiny video camera. This device is called a colonoscope.

**Large intestine:** A long, hollow tube in your body that makes and stores stool. Also called the colon.

**Polyp** (PAH-lip): An extra piece of tissue that grows inside the body.

**Rectum (REK-tum):** The last section of the large intestine, leading to the anus.

**Sigmoidoscopy (SIG-moy-DAW-skuh-pee):** A test to look inside the lower section of the large intestine. The doctor uses a flexible tube that contains a light and a tiny video camera. The device is called a sigmoidoscope.

**Stool:** The solid waste that passes through the rectum as a bowel movement.



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The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) is a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The NIDDK is part of the National Institutes of Health under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Established in 1980, the clearinghouse provides information about digestive diseases to people with digestive disorders and to their families, health care professionals, and the public. NDDIC answers inquiries, develops and distributes publications, and works closely with professional and patient organizations and Government agencies to coordinate resources about digestive diseases.

Publications produced by the clearinghouse are carefully reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts.

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This booklet is also available at  
[www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov).

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