
Colon and Rectal Polyps

What is a Colon or Rectal Polyp?

A polyp is a growth on the lining of the colon or rectum. Most polyps are harmless. But over time, some polyps may develop into colon or rectal cancer which can be fatal if found in its later stages. Colorectal cancer is the fourth most common cancer diagnosed in the US effecting men at a slightly higher rate than women.

There are two main categories of polyps, non-cancer forming (non-neoplastic) and cancer forming (neoplastic). Non-neoplastic polyps include hyperplastic polyps and inflammatory polyps. These types of polyps typically do not become cancerous. Neoplastic polyps include adenomas and serrated types. These types of polyps have the potential to develop into a colon cancer. In general, the larger the polyp, the greater the risk of cancer, especially with neoplastic polyps.

How do I know if I have a Polyp?

In most cases, polyps don't cause symptoms. Typically, patients are unaware that they have colon polyps. It's important to have regular screening tests, such as a colonoscopy, because colon polyps found in the early stages can usually be removed safely and completely during a colonoscopy. Some people, especially with larger polyps may experience:

- Rectal bleeding
- A change in stool color such as black or blood streaked
- A change in bowel habits such as constipation or diarrhea that lasts longer than one week
- Abdominal pain
- Iron deficiency anemia from bleeding causing fatigue and shortness of breath

How are Polyps Treated?

The best way to treat colon polyps is to find and remove them during a colonoscopy. The polyps are then sent to a lab and examined under a microscope by a pathologist to see what type of polyp it is and to look for any cancer cells.

If polyps are very large or can't be removed during a colonoscopy surgery may be required to remove the polyp.

What are the Risk Factors for Developing Colon Polyps?

- Age over 50
- Family History of polyps or colon cancer
- Having had polyps in the past
- Having an inflammatory condition of the intestines such as Crohn's disease or Ulcerative Colitis

- Having a hereditary disorder such as: Familial adenomatous polyposis, Gardner's syndrome, Juvenile polyposis, Lynch syndrome, Peutz-Jeghers syndrome or serrated polyposis syndrome.
- African Americans have the highest colorectal cancer incidence and mortality rates of all racial groups in the US. The reasons for this are not fully understood.

What can I do to Decrease My Risk of Developing Colon Polyps?

Many lifestyle-related factors have been linked to colorectal cancer and growth of polyps. In fact, the links between diet, weight, and exercise and colorectal cancer risk are some of the strongest for any type of cancer.

- **Maintain a healthy body weight.** If you are overweight or obese (very overweight), your risk of developing and dying from colorectal cancer is higher. Being overweight (especially having a larger waistline) raises the risk of colon and rectal cancer in both men and women, but the link seems to be stronger in men.
- **Get regular physical activity.** If you're not physically active, you have a greater chance of developing colon cancer. Regular moderate activity lowers your risk, but regular vigorous activity may be even more beneficial.
- **Eat a healthy low fat, high fiber diet.** A diet that's high in red meats (such as beef, pork, or lamb), processed meats (like hot dogs and some luncheon meats) and fatty or fried foods raises your colorectal cancer risk. It's not clear if other dietary components (for example, certain types of fats) affect colorectal cancer risk. It is recommended to eat a diet low in fat and high in fiber with fruits and vegetables.
- **Stop smoking.** People who have smoked tobacco for a long time are more likely than non-smokers to develop and die from colorectal cancer. Smoking is a well-known cause of lung cancer, but it's linked to a lot of other cancers, too. If you smoke and want to know more about quitting, see our Guide to Quitting Smoking.
- **Avoid excess use of alcohol.** Colorectal cancer has been linked to moderate to heavy alcohol use. Limiting alcohol use to no more than 2 drinks a day for men and 1 drink a day for women could have health benefits, including a lower risk of many kinds of cancer.

How can I Prevent Colon Cancer?

The best prevention for colon cancer is regular screening for polyps. Colonoscopy is the most sensitive test for colorectal polyps and colon cancer. Most people should have their first screening colonoscopy at age 50. For some people, depending on their family history and race, screening colonoscopy may begin earlier than age 50.

The frequency of colonoscopies and follow-up for patients with colon polyps depends on the presence of risk factors for developing colon cancer and the number, size and type of colon polyps found during previous colonoscopies.

References:

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/colon-rectal-cancer/causes-risks-prevention/risk-factors.html>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/colon-polyps/symptoms-causes/syc-20352875>

<https://www.cancer.gov/types/colorectal>