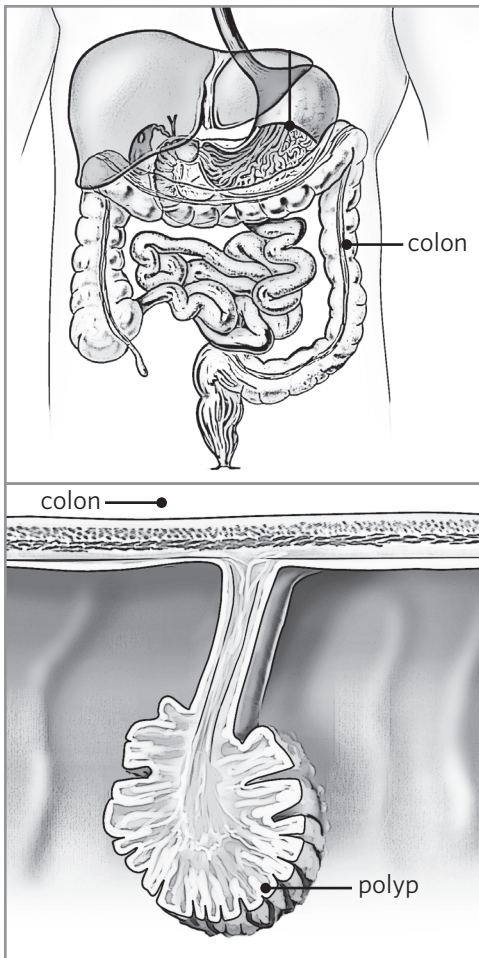


Colon Polyps



When you have a colon polyp, a clump of cells has formed on the lining of your colon. Colon polyps can be as small as a pea or as big as a golf ball, and flat or mushroom shaped. Usually they are harmless. However, over time, harmless polyps can turn into colorectal cancer, a serious kind of cancer that's often fatal if not found early.

You can help prevent colorectal cancer by talking to your doctor about regular colon screenings. These help your doctor find polyps and remove them before they have a chance to become cancer.

Know Your Risk

Anyone can get colon polyps, but you have a higher risk if:

- **you're 50 or older**
- **you're African American**
- **you or someone in your family has had colon polyps or colon cancer before**
- **you've had uterine or ovarian cancer before age 50**

Your lifestyle can also make you more likely to have polyps. But you can make changes to reduce your risk (see p. 2).

Colon polyps do not usually cause symptoms, so you probably won't know you have polyps until you have a colon exam. This is why it's so important to get screened regularly.

Screening

Various tests can screen for colon polyps:

- **Flexible sigmoidoscopy**—Your doctor inserts a small flexible tube with a camera on the end (a sigmoidoscope) through your rectum. An image of your lower colon then appears on a video screen. This shows your doctor if polyps are present, but only in the lower part of your colon.
- **Colonoscopy**—This is similar to sigmoidoscopy, except your doctor uses a longer tube (a colonoscope) to see your entire colon. Because of this, you will be given medicine to make you sleepy and more comfortable.
- **Barium enema**—Your doctor inserts a small tube through your rectum to coat your colon with barium sulfate. This makes your colon look white, so when your doctor X-rays the area, the dark-looking polyps can be easily seen.
- **Computerized tomography (CT) scan**—This is also called a virtual colonoscopy. First, your doctor stretches your colon by blowing air through a small tube into your rectum. Then, your doctor X-rays your colon using a CT scanner, which provides three-dimensional images.

Your doctor will discuss which tests are right for you, as well as how often you need to be screened. If you are at average risk, you need a colonoscopy once every 10 years or one of the other tests once every 5 years, all starting at age 50. If your risk is higher, your doctor may recommend screening more often.

If you've had colon polyps or colon cancer before, talk to your doctor about how often to schedule screenings.



To learn more, visit:

- **American Cancer Society**
www.cancer.org
- **MedlinePlus**
www.medlineplus.gov
- **National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse**
www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov

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Treatment

Colon polyps are treated by removing them. There are two main types of removal:

- **Snare**—Most polyps can be snared using a wire loop. Polyps found during a colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy are usually taken out during the test itself. When polyps are discovered during a barium enema or CT scan, you'll need to have a colonoscopy to remove them.
- **Surgery**—Polyps that can't be reached, or are too big to snare, are most often removed using laparoscopic surgery. Here, your doctor makes several small incisions and inserts tools with tiny cameras attached. Polyps are found and removed by watching an image of your colon on a video screen.

After removal, your doctor will send polyps to a lab to test for cancer.

What You Can Do

You can help prevent colon polyps from becoming cancer by having screenings as often as your doctor recommends and getting polyps removed. But making lifestyle changes can also lower your risk of getting new polyps:

- **Eat more fiber**—Choose high-fiber foods like fruits, vegetables and whole grains. As a general guideline, make half of your carbohydrates (breads, pastas, rice) whole grain and fill half your plate with fruits and veggies at every meal.
- **Eat less fatty food**—Avoid saturated fat, the kind found in whole milk, red meat, cheese and ice cream. Instead, make most of your fat the healthy, unsaturated type, found in foods like fish, walnuts and olive oil.
- **Maintain a healthy weight**—If you are overweight, talk to your doctor about diet and exercise options to help you lose extra pounds.
- **Exercise**—Make your goal 30 minutes of physical activity at least five days a week. If that's not possible, something is better than nothing: A new study shows that even one hour a week of gentle exercise, like walking or climbing stairs, reduces the risk of colon polyps.
- **Quit smoking**—Ask your doctor for help getting started. Prescription medicines and free resources like www.smokefree.gov can make quitting easier.
- **Avoid alcohol**—If you have more than one drink a day (or two for men), either cut back or cut out alcohol completely.

Remember:

- If you do have polyps, the sooner they are removed, the less likely they are to become cancer.
- Talk to your doctor about regular screenings starting at age 50, or earlier if you're at high risk.