

Understanding Polyps

What Is A Colon Polyp?

Polyps are growths involving the lining of the bowel (noncancerous growths). They vary in size from less than a quarter of an inch to several inches in diameter. They look like small bumps growing from the lining of the bowel and can be flat appearing or protruding into the lumen (bowel cavity). Many patients have several polyps scattered in different parts of the colon.

How Common Are Colon Polyps?

Polyps are very common in adults, who have an increased risk of acquiring them as they age. While quite rare in 20-year-olds, it is estimated that the average 60-year-old without special risk factors for polyps has a 25% chance of having a polyp.

What Causes Polyps?

We don't know what causes polyps. Some experts believe a high-fat, low fiber diet can be a predisposition to polyp formation. There may be a genetic risk to develop polyps as well.

What Are Known Risks for Developing Polyps?

The biggest risk factor for developing polyps is being older than 50. A family history or personal history of colon polyps or colon cancer increases the risk of polyps. In addition, there are some rare polyp or cancer syndromes that run in families and increase the risk of polyps occurring at younger ages.

How May I Prevent Polyps?

Studies show that the following may cut down on colon cancer risk: daily fruit, daily calcium (1200mg daily with vitamin D) and high fiber diet. Cutting down on red meat intake (less than 2 servings per week) may also lower colon cancer risk.

Are There Different Types of Polyps?

There are 2 main types of polyps: hyperplastic polyps and adenomas. The hyperplastic polyp is not at risk for cancer and is, therefore, mostly insignificant. However, the adenoma is thought to be a precursor for almost all colon cancers, although most adenomas never become cancers. It is impossible to tell which adenomas will become cancers. A biopsy (or small sampling of tissue) is the only way to differentiate between hyperplastic and adenomatous polyps. Because your doctor cannot be certain of the type of polyp just by looking at it, doctors generally recommend removing all but the smallest polyps.

How Are Polyps Found and Removed?

Most polyps can be found and completely removed by colonoscopy. The main hindrance to detecting polyps is a poor bowel preparation - this is why it is important to follow the preparation instructions completely the day prior to colonoscopy. Resected polyps can then be examined under a microscope to determine the polyp type.

How Often Do I need Colonoscopy?

Your doctor will decide when your next colonoscopy is necessary. The timing depends on several factors, including the number and size of polyps removed, the type of polyp, the quality of the bowel preparation, your age and family history.