Polyps, Colon

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 is a long, hollow tube at the end of your digestive tract where your body makes and stores stool.

Most polyps are not dangerous. They are benign. This means they are not cancerous. But over time, some types of polyps can turn into cancer. Polyps that are smaller than a pea are usually not harmful. But larger polyps could someday become or may already be cancerous. To be safe, doctors remove all polyps and test them.

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 are over 50.
- You have had polyps before.
- Someone in your family has had polyps.
- Someone in your family has had cancer of the large intestine.
- Find out if someone in your family has had polyps. You may also be more likely to get polyps if you:
  - Eat a lot of fatty foods
  - Smoke
  - Drink alcohol
  - Do not exercise
  - Eat too much

SYMPTOMS

Most small polyps do not cause symptoms. People often do not know they have one until their caregiver finds it during a regular checkup or while testing them for something else.

Some people do have symptoms like these:

- Bleeding from the anus. You might notice blood on your underwear or on toilet paper after you have 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 your caregiver.

HOW DOES THE DOCTOR TEST FOR POLYPS?

The doctor can use four tests to check for polyps:

- *Digital rectal exam*. The caregiver 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. Your caregiver may need to do one of the other tests listed below to find polyps higher up in the intestine.
- *Barium enema*. The caregiver 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 are easy to see.
- *Sigmoidoscopy*. With this test, the caregiver can see inside your large intestine. A thin flexible tube is placed into your rectum. The device is called a sigmoidoscope, which has a light and a tiny video camera in it. The caregiver uses the sigmoidoscope to look at the last third of your large intestine.
- *Colonoscopy*. This test is like sigmoidoscopy, but the caregiver looks at all of the large intestine. It usually requires sedation. This is the most common method for finding and removing polyps.

TREATMENT

- The caregiver will remove the polyp during sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy. The polyp is then tested for cancer.
- If you have had polyps, your caregiver may want you to get tested regularly in the future.

PREVENTION

There is not one sure way to prevent polyps. You might be able to lower your risk of getting them if you:

- Eat more fruits and vegetables and less fatty food.
- Do not smoke.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Exercise every day.
- Lose weight if you are 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.
- Aspirin might help prevent polyps. Studies are under way.

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