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What is a colon polyp?

Your doctor may have recently told you that you have a colon polyp. It may have already been removed or destroyed during a colonoscopy. The information below will answer questions you may have about this condition.

What is a colon polyp?

A colon polyp is a benign tumor or growth which arises on the inner surface of the colon. Amazingly, from mouth to rectum, the human intestinal tract averages about 30 feet in length. The last six feet is called the colon, or large intestine. Like a piece of pipe, the colon is hollow and the inner surface is normally smooth. For unknown reasons, some individuals grow polyps, or small lumps of tissue, on the inner wall of the colon. There may be single or multiple polyps. The cause is not known, but the incidence of polyps increases with age.

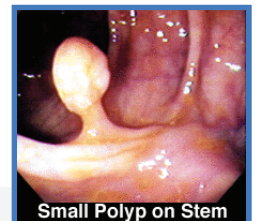
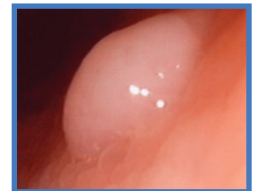
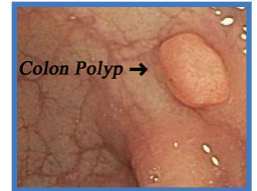
What does a polyp look like?

Colon polyps are found in one of two shapes. Polyps on stems or stalks look like mushrooms and are called pedunculated. When they grow directly onto the inner wall of the colon like spilled paint, they are called sessile and are much more difficult to remove.

What is a tumor?

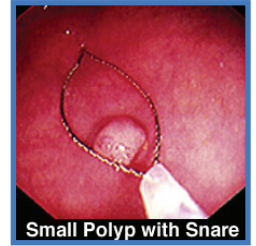
All tissues of the body are made up of millions of tiny individual cells. In health, there is a delicate balance. Old cells are constantly dying and are replaced by new healthy cells. If too many new cells form, they create a lump or mass which is called a tumor. Tumors can be benign or malignant. Benign tumors are not cancer.

They can usually be removed and, in most cases, they do not grow back. Cells from benign tumors do not spread to other parts of the body. Most important, benign tumors are rarely a threat to life. Malignant tumors are cancer. Cells in these tumors are abnormal and they continue to divide uncontrollably. Without treatment, they can invade and spread to nearby tissues and organs.



Why remove polyps if they are benign?

Colon polyps are important, since some may turn into colon cancer over time. While not every colon polyp turns to cancer, it is felt that almost every colon cancer begins as a small non-cancerous polyp. Fortunately, during colonoscopy, these polyps can be identified and removed or destroyed - thus preventing a possible colon cancer. If a polyp is large enough, tissue can be retrieved and sent for biopsy to determine the exact type of polyp.



What is dysplasia?

Dysplasia is halfway between benign and cancer - just like an abnormal Pap smear that isn't cancer yet. When removed and biopsied, both adenomas and villous adenomas may contain abnormal cells that are "almost cancer." Dysplastic polyps can be further divided into low grade dysplasia.

What are the stages of colon cancer?

Colon polyps usually cause no symptoms. Without screening and early detection, they may be present silently for many years, slowly growing larger day by day. Eventually, the cells become malignant. This is called **adenocarcinoma of the colon or colon cancer**. As time goes by, the cancer may spread. Then symptoms become obvious, but it is too late.

Can I reduce my risk of colon polyps?

There is no reliable way to prevent further colon polyps. However, the risk of polyps can be lowered somewhat by adding more fiber, extra calcium, and 400 micrograms (mcg.) of the vitamin folic acid to the daily diet. Low dose aspirin may also be protective. One study demonstrated a 40% drop in the incidence of recurrent polyps by taking an 81 mg baby aspirin daily. Interestingly, higher doses were less protective. But since polyps cannot be reliably prevented, periodic colonoscopy exams are recommended.