

Colon Polyps

Definition & Facts

What are colon polyps?

Colon polyps are growths on the lining of your [colon](#) and [rectum](#). You can have more than one colon polyp.

Are colon polyps cancerous?

[Colon and rectal cancer](#)—also called [colorectal cancer](#)—most often begins as polyps. Most polyps are not cancerous, but some may turn into cancer over time. Removing polyps can help prevent colorectal cancer. Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in the United States.¹

How common are colon polyps?

Colon polyps are common in American adults. Anywhere between 15 and 40 percent of adults may have colon polyps. Colon polyps are more common in men and older adults.²

Who is more likely to develop colon polyps?

Although anyone can develop colon polyps, you may have a greater chance of developing them if you

- are over age 50
- have someone in your family who has had polyps or colorectal cancer
- have [inflammatory bowel disease](#) such as [ulcerative colitis](#) or [Crohn's disease](#)
- have [obesity](#)³
- [smoke cigarettes](#)³

You may have a greater chance of developing polyps if someone in your family has had them.

When should I start colon polyp screening?

Screening is testing for diseases when you have no symptoms. Finding and removing polyps can help prevent colorectal cancer. Your doctor will recommend screening for colorectal cancer starting at age 50 if you don't have health problems or other factors that make you more likely to develop colorectal cancer.⁴

If you are at higher risk for colorectal cancer, your doctor may recommend screening at a younger age. You also may need to be tested more often.

If you are older than age 75, talk with your doctor about whether you should be screened. For more information, read the current [colorectal cancer screening guidelines](#) from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.

References

[1] Screening for colorectal cancer: U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendation statement. The JAMA Network website. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2529486> . Published June 21, 2016. Accessed September 7, 2017.

[2] Bonnington SN, Rutter MD. Surveillance of colonic polyps: are we getting it right? *World Journal of Gastroenterology*. 2016;22(6):1925–1934.

[3] Shussman N, Wexner SD. Colorectal polyps and polyposis syndromes. *Gastroenterology Report*. 2014;2(1):1–15

[4] Screening for colorectal cancer. U.S. Preventive Services Task Force website. <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/Page/Document/UpdateSummaryFinal/colorectal-cancer-screening2> . Updated June 2016. Accessed June 19, 2017.

Symptoms & Causes

What are the symptoms of colon polyps?

Most people with colon polyps don't have symptoms. You can't tell that you have polyps because you feel well. When colon polyps do cause symptoms, you may

- have bleeding from your [rectum](#). You might notice blood on your underwear or on toilet paper after you've had a [bowel movement](#).
- have blood in your [stool](#). Blood can make stool look black or can show up as red streaks in your stool.
- feel tired because you have [anemia](#) and not enough iron in your body. Bleeding from colon polyps can lead to anemia and a lack of iron.

Many other health problems can also cause these symptoms. However, if you have bleeding from your rectum or blood in your stool, contact your doctor right away.

What causes colon polyps?

Experts aren't sure what causes colon polyps. However, research suggests that certain factors, such as age and family history, can raise your chances of developing colon polyps.

Diagnosis

How do doctors diagnose colon polyps?

Doctors can find colon polyps only by using certain tests or procedures, such as a [colonoscopy](#) or imaging study. Your doctor may first take a medical and family history and perform a physical exam to help decide which test or procedure is best for you.

For example, your doctor may ask if you have any [symptoms](#). He or she may also ask if you have a family history of colon polyps or [colorectal cancer](#). After taking a medical and family history, your doctor may perform a physical exam.

Your doctor can find colon polyps only by using certain tests or procedures.

Tests and procedures

- **Flexible sigmoidoscopy.** For a [flexible sigmoidoscopy](#), a trained medical professional uses a [sigmoidoscope](#)—a flexible, narrow tube with a light and tiny camera on one end—to look inside your [rectum](#) and lower colon. Flexible sigmoidoscopy can show irritated or swollen tissue, [ulcers](#), polyps, and cancer.
- **Colonoscopy.** During a colonoscopy, a trained medical professional uses a long, flexible, narrow tube with a light and tiny camera on one end, called a colonoscope, to look inside your rectum and colon. Colonoscopy can show irritated and swollen tissue, ulcers, polyps, and cancer.
- **Virtual colonoscopy.** [Virtual colonoscopy](#) uses x-rays and a computer to create images of your rectum and colon from outside the body. Virtual colonoscopy can show ulcers, polyps, and cancer. Doctors can't remove polyps during virtual colonoscopy.
- **Lower gastrointestinal series.** For a [lower gastrointestinal \(GI\) series](#), a doctor uses x-rays and a chalky liquid called barium to view your large intestine. The barium will make your large intestine easier to see on an x-ray. A lower GI series is also called a barium enema.

Treatment

How do doctors treat colon polyps?

Doctors treat colon polyps by removing them.

In most cases, doctors use special tools during a [colonoscopy](#) or [flexible sigmoidoscopy](#) to remove colon polyps. After doctors remove the polyp, they send it for testing to check for cancer. A [pathologist](#) will review the test results and send a report to your doctor. Doctors can remove almost all polyps without surgery.

If you have colon polyps, your doctor will ask you to get tested regularly in the future because you have a higher chance of developing more polyps.

Seek Care Right Away

Call your doctor right away if you have any of the following symptoms after he or she removes a colon polyp:

- severe pain in your [abdomen](#)
- fever
- bloody [bowel movements](#) that do not get better
- bleeding from your [anus](#) that does not stop
- dizziness
- weakness

How can I prevent colon polyps?

Researchers don't know a sure way to prevent colon polyps. However, you can take steps to lower your chances of developing colon polyps.

Eating, diet, and nutrition

[Eating, diet, and nutrition](#) changes—such as eating less red meat and more fruits and vegetables—may lower your chances of developing colon polyps.

Healthy lifestyle choices

You can make the following healthy lifestyle choices to help lower your chances of developing colon polyps:

- get [regular physical activity](#)
- [don't smoke cigarettes](#) , and if you do smoke, quit
- avoid drinking alcohol
- lose weight if you're overweight

Being physically active and losing weight if you're overweight may lower your chances of developing colon polyps.

Aspirin

Taking a low dose of aspirin every day for a long period of time may help prevent polyps from developing into colorectal cancer in some people.⁵ However, taking aspirin daily may cause side effects such as bleeding in your [stomach](#) or [intestines](#). Talk with your doctor before you start taking aspirin daily.

References

[5] Aspirin use to prevent cardiovascular disease and colorectal cancer: preventive medication. U.S. Preventive Services Task Force website. <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/Page/Document/UpdateSummaryFinal/aspirin-to-prevent-cardiovascular-disease-and-cancer> . Published April 2016. Accessed September 7, 2017

Eating, Diet, & Nutrition

What type of eating plan is best to prevent colon polyps?

Research suggests that making the following changes may have health benefits and may lower your chances of developing colon polyps:

- eating more fruits, vegetables, and [other foods with fiber](#) , such as beans and bran cereal.
- losing weight if you're [overweight](#) and not gaining weight if you're already at a [healthy weight](#)

Eating more fruits, vegetables, and other foods with fiber may lower your chances of developing colon polyps.

Foods to limit

Research suggests that eating less of the following foods may have health benefits and may lower your chances of developing polyps:

- fatty foods, such as fried foods
- red meat, such as beef and pork
- processed meat, such as bacon, sausage, hot dogs, and lunch meats

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