

What is the Colon?

The colon or large intestine is an organ in your digestive system. When you eat, food is broken down in your stomach and small intestine, where nutrients are absorbed. It then moves into your colon, which absorbs water. Bacteria in your colon further break down any material, and it passes to the rectum. When you have a bowel movement, muscles move the remaining waste out of your body through the anus as stool.

Colorectal Cancer Screening

Changes to the cells in your colon and rectum can sometimes lead to cancer. As you grow older, you are more likely to develop colon polyps, which are growths on the inner lining of your large intestine. Most polyps are benign (not cancerous), but some polyps contain cells that are precancerous (may develop into cancer). Large polyps that have grown for a long time are more likely to become cancerous.

Screening tests look for a disease when a person has no symptoms. They are an important tool for finding cancer, or precancerous cells, early. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends that adults aged 45-75 should be screened for colorectal cancer at least every 10 years. If you have risk factors for colorectal cancer, your doctor may recommend that you start screening younger or be screened more often. Risk factors for colorectal cancer include inflammatory bowel disease, a personal or family history of polyps, a personal or family history of colorectal cancer, and certain genetic conditions.

What is colonoscopy?

Colonoscopy is a test used to view the inside of your colon and rectum. Colonoscopy is sometimes done to look for the cause of abdominal (belly) pain, blood in your stool, or changes in your bowel movements. It is also used to screen for colorectal cancer. The tool used for colonoscopy is called a colonoscope, which is a long flexible tube about the width of your pointer finger. It has a light and a camera so your doctor can see images of the inside of your colon and rectum.

Preparing for Colonoscopy

It is important to have an empty colon and rectum for a colonoscopy. Your doctor will give you instructions on how to prepare, including what and when to eat in the days before your procedure. "Bowel prep" typically includes drinking a laxative solution to empty your bowels and extra fluids with electrolytes so you are not dehydrated. Talk to your doctor about different options for bowel prep.

During the Procedure

Colonoscopy is usually an outpatient procedure, which means you will go home the same day. You will be given medication through an IV line and may feel deeply relaxed (under sedation) or be fully asleep (under anesthesia). The colonoscope is inserted through the anus, and the doctor pumps air or a sterile solution through the tube. This inflates the colon so the doctor can view it better. If you are awake during the procedure, you may feel pressure or bloating, or a sensation like you need to pass gas or have a bowel movement. This is normal, but let your doctor know if you have pain or discomfort.

Your doctor will view the colon and rectum looking for polyps or other changes. Sometimes small polyps can be removed during the colonoscopy. Your doctor may also take a small tissue sample (biopsy) from the colon lining. Removing polyps and taking biopsies does not hurt.

Colonoscopy typically takes 30-60 minutes. After the procedure, you will be in a recovery area for 30-60 more minutes while the sedative medicine wears off. You may feel bloated or gassy after the procedure. Passing gas is normal and will help relieve discomfort. Plan to rest for the day. You should not drive, work, or drink alcohol after your procedure.

Risks

Colonoscopy is considered a safe procedure. Complications are rare, but may include bleeding from biopsy or polyp removal, or a tear or hole in the colon. You may have other side effects from sedative medication, such as nausea or vomiting.

Alternatives

Colonoscopy is just one option for examining your colon and screening for cancer. Other options may include:

Flexible Sigmoidoscopy: a procedure similar to colonoscopy but with a shorter tube that views only the lower third of the colon.

CT Colonography (Virtual Colonoscopy): a procedure that uses x-rays to create images of the colon.

Stool tests: a test that uses a sample of your stool to look for changes in cell DNA or traces of blood.

Each of these alternatives has different pros and cons. Talk to your doctor about what test is right for you. You may want to consider these questions:

- How sensitive is the test? Does it accurately identify precancerous or cancerous cells?
- How often will I need the test?
- What kind of preparation is involved?
- What are the risks and possible complications?
- Is it covered by my insurance?

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