

Polyp 101

What is a Polyp?

Colon polyps are non-cancerous growths that develop inside the lining of the colon or rectum and generally grow slowly. They appear as domed shaped growths or have stalk and resemble a mushroom. Some have the potential to develop into cancer.

What causes polyps?

Most polyps develop because genetic mutations have occurred in the DNA of one of the cells lining the colon. Mutation in the genes controlling cell growth can cause cells to divide more rapidly than usual, resulting in a clump of abnormal cells. Mutations occur fairly often either randomly, from internal cellular processes or from exposure to environmental toxins. Fortunately, there are a number of mechanisms to protect cells from the harmful effect of mutations (by producing proteins to repair the mutation, causing badly mutated cells to commit suicide (apoptosis), etc). 99.9% of these types of mutations are not inherited.

Who is at risk of developing a polyp?

- Everyone as they age
- Person who is suffering or has suffered in the past from bowel diseases such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease
- Person whose family members may have been diagnosed with polyps or colorectal cancer
- Person who belongs to a family with Familial Adenomatous Polyposis (a rare genetic syndrome)
- Person with poor dietary habits, such as high fat intake and lack of fruits and vegetables
- Person with lifestyle choices of smoking, alcohol use and lack of exercise.

How do I know that I may have a polyp?

- ∴ Most polyps do not cause any symptoms and grow silently for years
- ∴ Sometimes they cause pain, constipation, diarrhea, or blood in the stool.

How can polyps be diagnosed and how can they be removed?

- ∴ The most accurate method of finding and removing polyps is a colonoscopy
- A flexible tube equipped with a camera is inserted into the rectum to examine the entire colon and rectum. The photograph will show the doctor what a polyp looks like. Polyps found can be removed by snaring them with a wire lasso or by burning them with an electric probe.

What can I do to prevent polyps from forming?

- Eat healthy and follow a healthy lifestyle
- Consume a low fat diet with at least 25 grams of fiber each day. Foods rich in fiber are: fruit, vegetables, whole grain breads, cereals, nuts and beans
- Consume food rich in folate such as leafy vegetables
- Drink alcohol in moderation
- Don't smoke, don't start if you are not smoking and quit if you are
- Exercise (brisk walk, gardening, climbing steps, etc.) at least 20 minutes three to four days a week.

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