

Colon Polyps

What is a polyp?

A polyp is a small growth on the lining of the intestine. Sometimes there is only one polyp, but there may be several intestinal present at the same time. There also are rare conditions in which the colon (large intestine) contains a very large number of polyps. Polyps may be either benign (non-cancerous) or malignant (cancerous).

Why are polyps removed?

Polyp removal is recommended for two reasons. First, in order to determine whether a polyp is benign or malignant, it is usually necessary for a pathologist to examine the tissue under a microscope. Second, most polyps, even though benign, have the potential to grow larger and become malignant if left in place. Removal of these polyps prevents them from becoming cancerous.

How are polyps removed?

The tiniest polyps are removed by burning or cauterizing them; larger polyps can usually be removed using a specially designed snare which cuts the stalk of a polyp and cauterizes it at the same time, so that it does not bleed. The snare is passed through a channel in the colonoscope to accomplish this. There is a small (less than 0.1% or 1 in 1000 chance) that the colonoscopic procedure may cause a perforation of the colon. These rare perforations may be observed and may heal over time. Or, an immediate operation to repair the perforation may be required.

Is an operation ever necessary to remove polyps?

Occasionally operative removal may be necessary, either because the stalk or neck of the polyp is too broad to permit safe snaring, or because the colon is positioned in such a way that the colonoscope will not reach the polyp area safely. The great majority of polyps, however, can be removed without an operation.