



Colorectal Polyps

A polyp is a fleshy growth on the inside of the bowel. Some people may develop just a single polyp, while others can have two or more at a time. Polyps can either be on a stalk (in which case the polyp looks a little like a mushroom growing up from the lining of the bowel) or they can be much flatter and even have quite a broad base. Polyps are benign but they are important because some of them eventually become malignant. Bowel cancers develop from polyps.

Polyps occur in the lowest part of the intestine, called the large bowel (which includes the colon and rectum). Polyps seem to be most common towards the lower part of the colon and also in the rectum.

Polyps are very common indeed - especially for those of us who live in the Western world. About one in four people (25%) will have a polyp at some time in their life. Polyps tend to be slightly more common in men than women. They're frequency increases with age.

There are different types of polyp that can occur in the bowel. Not all of these polyps have the potential to become cancers.

The polyp, which it is most important to detect and treat is called an **adenoma**.

The only way to establish what sort of polyp it is is by removing it and having it analysed in the laboratory.

What causes polyps?

The lining of the bowel constantly renews itself throughout our lives. There are millions of tiny cells in the lining which grow, serve their purpose and then new cells take their place. Each of these millions of cells contains genes, which give instructions to the cell on how to behave. When genes behave in a faulty manner, this can cause the cells to grow more quickly, eventually producing a small bump on the bowel surface which we call a polyp

A polyp, or more strictly the particular type of polyp called an adenoma, starts out as a tiny bump on the surface of the bowel. The genes give instructions to make the cells grow more quickly, but to do so in an orderly manner. Some polyps remain very small throughout their lives while others continue to enlarge. Most polyps remain benign throughout life but about 1 in 10 will turn into cancer. All malignancies of the bowel begin as benign polyps; so removing benign polyps can prevent the development of cancer.

What symptoms do polyps cause?

Usually polyps do not cause symptoms, and most people will not know if they have them. Occasionally they can cause bleeding from the back passage. This can sometimes be seen or can be a very small amount which is not seen but can be tested for. Sometimes polyps produce an excess of mucus or slime, which can be noticed on the motions when opening the bowel, and they can occasionally cause abdominal pain..





Diagnosing polyps

Polyps can be detected either by colonoscopy or in the past by a barium enema x-ray. Both methods require the bowel to be as clear as possible before the procedure so you will be asked to follow a special diet as well as take laxatives. Both techniques also involve a small tube being passed through the back passage. In the case of a barium enema this is to allow a liquid to be passed into the bowel that will show up on x-rays. In colonoscopy a soft flexible tube is passed along the back passage and then through the whole colon. Sometimes a shorter instrument called a sigmoidoscope is used but this can only pass up through the lower colon. If the barium enema does reveal a polyp, a colonoscopy will then be needed to remove it. Colonoscopy is a more accurate investigation and so is more commonly used.

The most common reason to carry out an examination of the bowel is that a patient has noticed symptoms that seem to originate from the bowels. However, increasingly, patients are being asked to give a sample of their stool for a chemical test which can detect small quantities of blood that are not visible. This test is called 'faecal occult blood' test. There is a national programme of faecal occult blood testing in people without symptoms to try and detect polyps while they are asymptomatic and then to remove them before they become cancerous.

Treatment

The majority of polyps can be removed at the time of colonoscopy. The technique consists of passing a wire through the colonoscope and looping the wire around the polyp like a lasso to remove it (polypectomy). This procedure is quite painless and only one examination is needed to clear the bowel of polyps. Occasionally, there may be too many polyps for all of them to be removed safely and the procedure may need to be repeated.

Once they have been removed all polyps are sent to the laboratory for microscopic analysis. This will show whether or not the polyp has been completely removed, whether it has the potential to develop malignancy and, of course, to be sure that cancer has not already developed.

Once a polyp has been removed you will probably need to have a follow-up examination if the microscopic findings suggest that the polyp has any malignant potential. If so, your doctor will repeat colonoscopy in the future to check whether new polyps have grown. Depending on what is found at that time, your doctor may either suggest that nothing further need be done or that you should return for a further colonoscopy. The timing of this requires detailed knowledge of the size, number and histological assessment of the polyp.



Family history

We now know that up to 10% of people who tend to form polyps may do so because the likelihood of that happening is inherited. In most cases neither polyps nor indeed bowel cancer run in the family.

When a number of members of the family have had polyps or bowel cancer and especially if they have developed these at a young age - then your doctor may recommend that you have a regular colonoscopy even if you have no symptoms.

If you are an individual who tends to form polyps, your bowel should be regularly inspected and any polyps that have formed should be removed.

Lifestyle factors to prevent polyps

You can eat normally and do not need to follow a special diet. A healthy diet, which includes a wide variety of foods and plenty of fruit and vegetables is good for your general health. Aim to have 5 portions of fruit or vegetables each day.

Maintaining ideal body weight and taking regular exercise may help to reduce the risk of polyps and cancer.

