

COLON POLYPS AND COLON CANCER PREVENTION

A polyp of the colon is a small growth on the inner lining of the colon. Colon polyps do not often cause symptoms. Sometimes they can cause visible bleeding or result in a positive stool test for microscopic blood.

HEALTH NOTES



For more information

Visit kp.org/health

- Type “Colon Polyps” in the search box

Call a Kaiser Permanente Medical Advice Nurse

- Talk to a medical advice nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call **(703) 359-7878** or **(800) 777-7904**, TTY 711.

Polyps can be either benign (non-cancerous) or malignant (cancerous).

- Most polyps will not become cancer but nearly all colorectal cancers arise from a polyp.
- It takes about 10 years for some small polyps to become cancer.
- Most polyps can be safely removed during a colonoscopy.

Polyp types

Two most common types of colon polyps are **Adenomas** and **Hyperplastic** polyps:

- **Adenomatous polyps** (Adenomas) are colon polyps that are called “pre-cancerous” as these may turn into cancer if not removed. An estimated 40% of Americans aged 50 years or older will have an adenomatous polyp. However, the lifetime risk of colon cancer is only about 5%. The larger the polyp, the greater the chance of cancer cells within the polyp.
- **Hyperplastic polyps** are benign, non-cancerous growths that are most often found in the lower part of the colon (sigmoid colon and rectum). Hyperplastic polyps are quite common. Hyperplastic polyps are not pre-cancerous, this means that there is no increased risk for getting colon cancer.

How can precancerous polyps be prevented?

The risk factors for getting precancerous polyps are likely the same risks factors for getting colon cancer. Some of these risks are environmental and others may be genetic or family risk factors. Learn more about these risk factors below.

Risks that you can change

What you eat

- **Diets that are high in processed meats** (such as bacon, sausage, hot dogs and some luncheon meats) or red meats (such as beef, pork, lamb, or liver) raise colon cancer risk. Nitrates and nitrites found in processed meat can be converted by the body into nitrosamines which can be carcinogenic (cancer-causing).
- **Cooking meats using high heat methods** such as grilling or smoking can release harmful cancer-causing chemicals.
- **Eating a whole plant-based diet** can help protect you from colon cancer. In this diet a large portion of nutrients comes from plant products. This includes fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans and legumes. Plant-based diets are high in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. Antioxidants help prevent cell damage in the body and this can help lower the risk of colon cancer.

Alcohol intake

- Drinking alcohol raises your risk of colon cancer. Alcohol also raises your risk for other cancers such as mouth and throat, voice box (larynx), esophagus, liver, breast (in women) .

Tobacco use

- Quitting smoking will help lower your risk of having large precancerous polyps. It also lowers your risk for other types of cancer.

Activity levels and being overweight

- Being overweight and obese raises colon cancer risk. It also is linked to other types of cancer such as colorectal cancer and esophageal cancer.

Risks you cannot change

Age

- The risk of colorectal cancer goes up as you age.
- Colon cancer is more common in people over 50 but rates are also going up for those under 50.

Personal history

- You are at higher risk if you have had colon adenomas or colon cancer in the past.

Family history of colon cancer or colon adenomas

- You are at higher risk if you have:
 - » A first-degree relative (parent, sibling or child) with a history of colon cancer.
 - » A first-degree relative who was diagnosed with colon cancer when they were younger than 50.
 - » Family members who have had precancerous polyps.
- If you have had a single second-degree relative (such as grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin) or any higher-degree relatives with colorectal cancer you are not at high risk. You can screen at average risk.

Having inflammatory bowel disease (such as Crohn colitis or ulcerative colitis)

- Chronic inflammation in the colon, makes your risk of colon cancer go up. If you have long term bowel irritation, make sure you are getting the right care and treatment.

Inherited syndromes

- About 5% of those who get colon cancer have inherited specific genes that causes family cancer syndrome.

What you can do

Colon cancer screening

- If you are age 45 or older, you should start getting screened for colon cancer.
 - » Speak with your doctor about what is best for you. Options can include a colonoscopy, a virtual colonoscopy or stool testing.

- Talk with your doctor about your risk if you have:
 - » A first degree relative with colon cancer or precancerous colon polyps
 - » Two second degree relatives with colon cancer
- Review your family history with your doctor. Be sure to also discuss any family history of other types of cancers across family members.

Routine colon health checks

- If you have had precancerous colon polyps in the past, speak with your doctor. You may need to have colonoscopies more often to monitor to colon.
- How often this happens will depend on the size and number of past polyps that were removed.

Tip for your daily life

Remember- Some foods can make your risk of colon cancer go up, while other foods can lower your risk.

Stop eating or eat less of these foods:

- **Red meats** such as beef, veal, pork, lamb, and goat
- **Processed meats** such as hot dogs, ham, sausages, corned beef, and jerky.

Add or eat more of these foods:

- **Whole plant based foods** - these are fiber rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, and legumes which are not processed. This means they have no added chemicals.
- **Fiber** - this changes how intestinal bacteria is metabolized and leads to more short chain fatty acids in the body. These fatty acids help lower your risk.
 - » High fiber foods have other nutrients like vitamins, mineral and antioxidants.
 - » Getting fiber from high fiber foods is better than taking a fiber supplement.
- **It is best to not drink alcohol.** If you do drink, limit alcohol use to no more than 2 drinks a day for men and 1 drink a day for women.

Be more active

- **Aim to do moderately vigorous activity** for 30-60 minutes each day (or at least 3-4 times per week.) Moderately vigorous activity is when you break a light sweat and raise your heart rate.
- **Stay at a healthy weight range**
 - » If you need help losing weight, talk to your doctor about taking a weight management class.

Quit tobacco.

- **Talk to your doctor** about options to help you be more successful at quitting use of tobacco.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent medical problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor or member of your health care team.

HEALTH ENGAGEMENT

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