

Colonoscopy

What is a colonoscopy?

A colonoscopy (koh-luh-NAH-skuh-pee) allows a doctor to look inside the entire large intestine. The procedure enables the physician to see things such as inflamed tissue, abnormal growths, and ulcers. It is most often used to look for early signs of cancer in the colon and rectum. It is also used to look for causes of unexplained changes in bowel habits and to evaluate symptoms like abdominal pain, rectal bleeding, and weight loss.

What is the colon?

The colon, or large bowel, is the last portion of your digestive tract, or gastrointestinal tract. The colon is a hollow tube that starts at the end of the small intestine and ends at the rectum and anus. The colon is about 5 feet long, and its main function is to store unabsorbed food waste and absorb water and other body fluids before the waste is eliminated as stool.

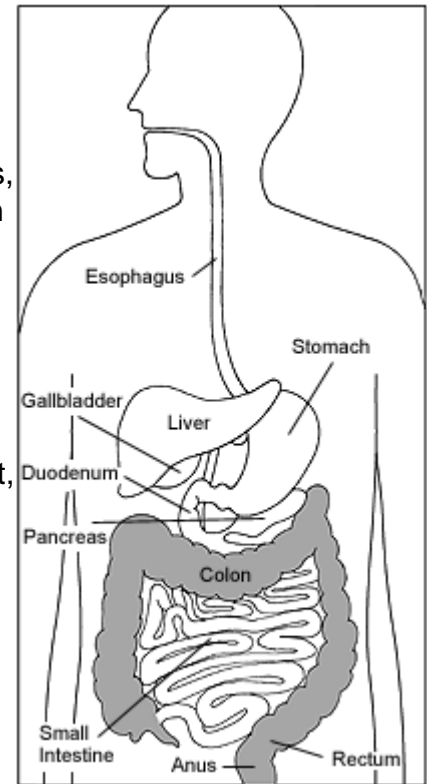
Preparation

You will be given instructions in advance that will explain what you need to do to prepare for your colonoscopy. Your colon must be completely empty for the colonoscopy to be thorough and safe. To prepare for the procedure you will have to follow a liquid diet beforehand. The liquid diet should be clear and not contain food colorings, and may include

- fat-free bouillon or broth
- strained fruit juice
- water
- plain coffee
- plain tea
- diet soda
- gelatin

Thorough cleansing of the bowel is necessary before a colonoscopy. You will likely be asked to take a laxative the night before the procedure. Be sure to inform your doctor of any medical conditions you have or medications you take on a regular basis.

The medical staff will also want to know if you have heart disease, lung disease, or any medical condition that may need special attention. Because you will be given a sedative, you must also arrange for someone to take you home and stay with you. Even if you feel alert after the procedure, your judgment and reflexes could be impaired for the rest of the day. Generally, your entire stay in the facility should be less than two hours.



The digestive system

Procedure

For the colonoscopy, you will lie on your left side on the examining table. You will be given a moderate sedative to keep you comfortable and help you relax during the exam. The anesthetist will monitor your vital signs, look for any signs of discomfort, and make adjustments as needed.

The doctor will then insert a long, flexible, lighted tube into your rectum and slowly guide it into your colon. The tube is called a colonoscope (koh-LON-oh-skope). The scope transmits an image of the inside of the colon onto a video screen so the doctor can carefully examine the lining of the colon. The scope bends so the doctor can move it around the curves of your colon. The scope blows air into your colon and inflates it, which helps give the doctor a better view. Most patients do not remember the procedure afterwards.

The doctor can remove most abnormal growths in your colon, like a polyp, which is a growth in the lining of the bowel. Polyps are removed using tiny tools passed through the scope. Most polyps are not cancerous, but they could turn into cancer. Just looking at a polyp is not enough to tell if it is cancerous. The polyps are sent to a lab for testing. By identifying and removing polyps, a colonoscopy likely prevents most cancers from forming.

The doctor can also remove tissue samples to test in the lab for diseases of the colon (biopsy). In addition, if any bleeding occurs in the colon, the doctor can pass an electrical probe, or special medicines through the scope to stop the bleeding. The tissue removal and treatments to stop bleeding usually do not cause pain. In many cases, a colonoscopy allows for accurate diagnosis and treatment of colon abnormalities without the need for a major operation.

When the doctor has finished, the colonoscope is slowly withdrawn while the lining of your bowel is carefully examined. Bleeding and puncture of the colon are possible but uncommon complications of a colonoscopy.

A colonoscopy procedure usually takes less than 30 minutes. The sedative medicine should keep you from feeling discomfort during the exam. You may feel some cramping and bloating because of the air introduced into the colon during the exam. This should disappear quickly when you pass gas. You will need to remain at the colonoscopy facility until you are awake enough to be safely escorted home.

Rarely, some people experience severe abdominal pain, fever, bloody bowel movements, dizziness, or weakness afterward. If you have any of these side effects, contact your physician immediately. Read your discharge instructions carefully. Medications such as blood-thinners may need to be stopped for a short time after having your colonoscopy, especially if a biopsy was performed or polyps were removed. Full recovery by the next day is normal and expected and you may return to your regular activities.

For More Information

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Publications produced by the Clearinghouse are carefully reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This publication was originally reviewed by Michael Wallace, M.D., Mayo Clinic.

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