What is a colon polyp?

Colon polyps are tiny growths that form on the inside of the large intestine (also known as the colon) (Figure 1). Polyps are very common. Roughly one-third to one-half of all adults have them by the time they are 50 years old. They don’t usually cause symptoms. But some polyps can be cancerous, so doctors sometimes remove them.

What are the symptoms of colon polyps?

Colon polyps do not usually cause symptoms.

How do doctors find colon polyps?

Doctors use different tools to find colon polyps. These tools vary from one type of screening test to another.

Colonoscopy – Before having a colonoscopy, you will get medicine to help you relax. Then a doctor will put a long tube into your anus and advance it into your lower colon. The tube has a camera on the end, so the doctor can remove pieces of tissue, including polyps. If polyps are removed, they usually go to a lab to be tested for cancer and other problems.

Stool test – “Stool” is another word for “bowel movements.” Stool tests check for blood or abnormal genes in samples of stool. If a stool test indicates that something might be wrong with the colon, doctors usually follow up with a colonoscopy. Then doctors find polyps, if they are there.

CT colonography (also known as virtual colonoscopy) – For a virtual colonoscopy, you have a special kind of X-ray taken, called a “CT scan.” This test creates pictures of the colon.

Capsule colonoscopy – Rarely, your doctor might do something called a “capsule” colonoscopy. For this test, you swallow a special capsule that contains tiny wireless video cameras.

How are colon polyps treated?

The treatments depend on the same factors that can be used to remove them:

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Sigmoidoscopy – A sigmoidoscopy is very similar to a colonoscopy. The only difference is that this test only looks at the first part of the colon, and it is usually done at the office or clinic.

During a colonoscopy, you lie on your side and the doctor or nurse puts a thin tube into the rectum and colon. The camera sends pictures from inside your colon to a television screen.

This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called “the digestive system,” or “digestive tract.” As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.