

Introduction

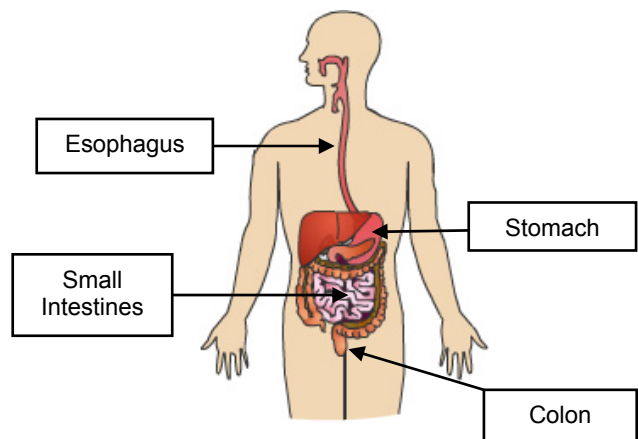
A colonoscopy is a simple procedure that allows your physician to look inside the colon and to discover certain diseases, such as cancer, very early. A colonoscopy is a very well tolerated procedure that could be life saving.

This reference summary will explain to you the advantages, as well as the possible risks and complications, of this procedure.

Anatomy

The colon is the last part of the intestines and is also known as the large intestine.

Swallowed food goes through the esophagus, also known as “the feeding tube.” It then passes through the stomach, where it is partially digested. Digested food goes from the stomach to the small intestines, where nutrients are further digested and absorbed.



Fibers and digested food then reach the colon. In the colon, the rest of the nutrients get absorbed and stools are formed. Stools are then stored in the last part of the colon, the sigmoid and rectum, before being excreted.

Arteries provide blood to the colon, and veins take the blood back toward the heart.

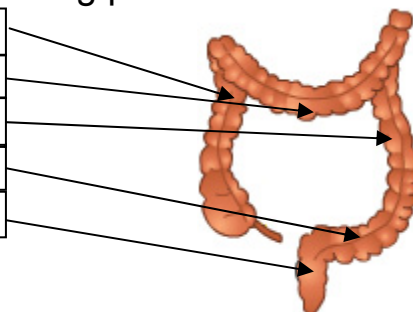
The excess fluid is drained to the bloodstream through a network of vessels called lymphatic tissue and lymph nodes. Lymph nodes also help fight infections.

Colon cancer may spread to the liver, small intestines, and other parts of the body through the lymph nodes or through direct contact.

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The colon is made up of the following parts:

- The ascending colon
- The transverse colon
- The descending colon
- The sigmoid colon
- The rectum and the anus.



Diseases of the Colon

Colon cancer is one of the most common cancers among men and women. It tends to occur in families. Genetic testing has shown that patients at risk for prostate cancer may also be at risk for colon cancer. A colonoscopy allows the doctor to detect colon cancer early and possibly cure it.

Colon cancer usually starts as an abnormality, called a polyp, which dangles inside the colon. Not all polyps result in cancer, but they should be watched very closely.

Colon cancer can lead to blood in the stools as well as a change in bowel movement habits.

Other diseases of the colon include chronic inflammation or infections of the colon. They can lead to diarrhea and possibly bleeding. Some of these diseases can lead to colon cancer.



Alternative Procedures

A barium enema is a radiological test that allows the doctor to see an x-ray of the colon. A barium enema does not provide actual pictures of the colon. In addition, biopsies are not possible with a barium enema.

In a biopsy, the doctor takes a sample of abnormal tissue for examination under the microscope. A special CAT scan of the colon can also be taken. It is called a virtual colonoscopy. It allows detailed views of the inside of the colon, but as in the case of the barium enema, it does NOT allow a biopsy to be taken if something abnormal is found. A colonoscopy is the only available procedure that allows your doctor to look at the inside of the colon and to take small samples from abnormal areas.

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Current recommendations for early detection of colon cancer or polyps require colonoscopy for the general population at age 50 and every 10 years if no abnormalities are found.

For persons with one or more family members with colon cancer, the screening should be done at age 40 or even younger, depending on how many relatives have had colon cancer and how old they were.

Before the Procedure

For a colonoscopy, the colon needs to be very clean. For this reason, you will be given a strong laxative. This will cause significant diarrhea that will clean the colon of any stools. Before the procedure, you will also be asked to go on a clear liquid diet for one day to help decrease the formation of any stools.

The Procedure

A colonoscopy is an outpatient procedure. This means you will get to go home after the procedure is finished.

Prior to the procedure, you may be given intravenous medications to relax and sedate you. The procedure aims at introducing a flexible scope inside the colon, through the rectum. The scope has a light source as well as fiberoptics that allow pictures from inside the colon to be projected onto a video screen.



As the scope is introduced into the rectum, you may feel the urge to defecate. This is normal. Let your doctor know if the sensation persists. He or she can give you more medication to relax you.

After inserting the scope inside the rectum, the doctor looks at the sigmoid and descending colon. Next, the doctor proceeds to the transverse colon. Finally, the scope is taken all the way to the ascending colon.

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If your doctor finds a suspicious area, he or she may be able to take part or all of it out and send it to the lab. A pathologist then examines the tissue under a microscope and determines whether it has evidence of cancer or other diseases.

When the procedure is finished, the doctor removes the scope. The colonoscopy is usually not painful, but the patient may experience some discomfort.

Risks and Complications

A colonoscopy is a very safe procedure that could be life saving. However, it has possible risks that you should learn about.

Injuring the inside of the colon or even poking a hole through it is a rare possibility. If this happens, an operation may be needed to fix the injury.

Occasionally, the colon is not as clean as it should be. In this case the colonoscopy may need to be postponed. If tissue is removed, some bleeding from the rectum could occur. This is usually not excessive.

After the Procedure

You should be able to go home the same day of the procedure. When you are ready to go home, you should not drive a car. Arrange for somebody to drive you home.

Your doctor may recommend that you rest and relax that same day until the effects of the sedation medication are gone. Be sure to call your physician if you experience severe belly pain, fever, or belly distention, where your belly gets bigger very quickly.

If tissue was removed, talk with your doctor about when the results will be available. Some patients may need to have the colonoscopy repeated regularly to make sure new abnormalities have not developed.

Summary

A colonoscopy is a common procedure that allows doctors to look inside the colon and to do biopsies if necessary. A colonoscopy is a very safe procedure that can detect colon cancer early. Early detection of cancer can lead to early treatment and a possible cure it. Some risks and complications exist, but they are very rare.



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