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What is a Colonoscopy?

It is a safe, effective means of visually examining the full lining of the colon and rectum, using a long, flexible, sterilized, tubular instrument. It is used to diagnose colon and rectum problems and to perform biopsies and remove colon polyps. Most colonoscopies are done under sedation on an outpatient basis with minimal inconvenience and discomfort.

Who should have a Colonoscopy?

Your physician may recommend a colonoscopy exam if you have a change in bowel habits or bleeding, indicating a problem in the colon and rectum. Recent guidelines have suggested a colonoscopy as one of several accepted screening tests available for detecting colon cancer. A colonoscopy may also be necessary to:

- Check unexplained abdominal symptoms
- Check inflammatory bowel disease (colitis)
- Verify findings of polyps or tumors located with a barium enema exam or identified by “virtual colonoscopy/colonography”
- Examine patients who test positive for blood in the stool
- Monitor patients with a past personal history of colon polyps or cancer or patients with a family history colon cancer

How is a Colonoscopy performed?

The bowel must first be thoroughly cleared of all residue before a colonoscopy. It is important that the preparation be done carefully so that the exam may be completed successfully. The preparation may be done in several ways, depending on your physician’s recommendations and your preference.

The colonoscope is inserted and when possible will be advanced to the portion of the colon where the small intestine enters. During a complete examination of the bowel, your physician will remove polyps to take biopsies as necessary.

The entire procedure usually takes less than an hour. There is little pain; however, mild sedation is given when necessary to relieve anxiety and discomfort. Following the colonoscopy, there may be slight discomfort, which quickly improves with the expelling of gas. Most patients can resume their regular diet later that day.

What are the benefits and potential risks of a Colonoscopy?

With a colonoscopy, it is not possible to detect and remove most polyps without abdominal surgery. A colonoscopy is more accurate than an x-ray exam of the colon to detect polyps or early cancer. Frequently, polyps can be removed at the same time, a major step towards the prevention of colon cancer. Many other disorders of the colon may also be identified including diverticular disease and inflammatory bowel disease.

With any invasive procedure there are potential risks. The two most significant are bleeding and perforation. These are rare complications that are usually recognized at the time of the procedure.

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