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EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT Polyps In The Bowel

What is a polyp?

Bowel polyps are small growths on the inner lining of the colon (large bowel) or rectum. They are common, affecting 15-20% of the UK population, and don't usually cause symptoms. Polyps are usually less than 1cm in size, although they can grow up to several centimetres.

If polyps are not removed they may grow and eventually lead to cancer and so their removal lessens the risk of bowel cancer.



WHAT CAUSES BOWEL POLYPS?

It is thought that polyps are caused by the body producing too many cells in the lining of the bowel. These extra cells then form into a bump, which is the polyp. You may be more likely to develop bowel polyps if a member of your family has had bowel polyps or bowel cancer.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Most polyps cause no symptoms but sometimes they bleed easily and the blood can be seen mixed with the stool or on its surface. They can also secrete clear mucus which is passed with the stool. Very rarely, a polyp can cause a partial or complete blockage of the bowel causing constipation or diarrhoea with abdominal pain, bloating, and in severe cases, vomiting.

HOW ARE POLYPS DIAGNOSED?

1. By taking a biopsy during an endoscopy, which passes a flexible telescope up from the anus.
2. An X Ray examination using barium to outline the bowel - a small tube is placed in the anus and barium and air are introduced. X Rays are taken from different angles to detect any irregularity in the bowel wall.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

Polyps can be removed painlessly using a colonoscope, which manoeuvres a wire "snare" around the base of the polyp and separates it from the bowel using a small electric current. However, occasionally an operation is required to remove the polyp.



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER TREATMENT?

After removal the polyp will be examined under a microscope to determine whether it has been removed completely or what the risk is of it coming back.

The microscopic analysis of the polyp will suggest if it carries a risk of becoming cancerous. This type of polyp is called an “adenoma”. If the adenoma has been fully removed there is no further treatment necessary however patients will have at least one further colonoscopy after a few years as there is a risk that further adenomas can develop.

If the polyp has not been completely removed or has cancerous cells within it a second colonoscopy or operation may be needed to try to ensure that the abnormal tissue is removed completely.

Familial polyps are uncommon inherited conditions where patients develop several polyps and these require special treatment which may include surgery.



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