



# Going for Colonoscopy to Prevent Colorectal Cancer

By Dr Quah Hak Mien

**C**olorectal cancer is the top cancer in Singapore. The number is increasing and it has become the commonest cancer in recent years. Screening for colorectal cancer has been proven to save lives. The simplest and easiest way of screening the colon is the stool test. Colonoscopy is considered the most accurate method to examine the colon and rectum.

Colonoscopy is a specialised investigative procedure to evaluate the lining of the colon and rectum directly. During colonoscopy, a soft flexible telescope camera tube is inserted through the anus and advanced into the rectum and colon. It can detect colorectal cancer early or prevent it by removing polyps. It is also performed to evaluate symptoms of bowel problems such as a change in bowel habits or bleeding.

#### **What preparation is required?**

The colonoscopy procedure sounds scarier than it actually is. The first step is bowel cleansing. The rectum and colon must be completely emptied of stools for the procedure to be performed. Bowel preparation involves taking a special cleansing solution or laxative to clean the colon of stool debris.

The telescope cannot see through stool debris. So any stool debris left in the colon could obscure the identification of a polyp or even a small cancer. A clean colon cleared of all stools is required as it improves the accuracy and safety of the procedure.



### What can be expected during colonoscopy?

Colonoscopy itself is usually well tolerated. There may be a feeling of pressure, bloatedness or cramping at times during the procedure. Your doctor will give you an injection to help you relax and to bear with any discomfort that you may experience. The lining of the colon and rectum is carefully inspected during the insertion and withdrawal of the scope. The entire procedure usually lasts for ten to thirty minutes.

### What if colonoscopy shows an abnormality?

If your doctor sees an area of abnormality that needs more careful evaluation, a biopsy may be taken and submitted to the laboratory for a detailed microscopic analysis. Polyps can be removed with special instruments accompanying the scope. The biopsy does not necessarily imply the existence of cancer. The removal of polyps essentially prevents any progression of the polyp.

### What complications can occur?

Colonoscopy is very safe and complications are rare, at a risk of less than 1 in 1000. Possible complications include bleeding from the area of biopsy or polypectomy, or a tear (perforation) through the bowel wall. Perforation is a serious complication which usually requires abdominal surgery to repair.

It is important to contact your doctor if you notice symptoms such as severe abdominal pain, fevers, chills or rectal bleeding of more than one-half cup. Bleeding can occur up to several days after a biopsy.

### What happens after colonoscopy?

The results of your colonoscopy will be explained to you after your procedure at the clinic. You may have some mild cramping or bloatedness because of the air pumped in during the procedure to inflate the colon for visualisation. The bloatedness will improve rapidly when the inflated air is extracted after the procedure or when you pass out the residual air naturally. You should be able to eat normally and return to your normal activities upon leaving the hospital on the same day.

Colonoscopy detection and the removal of polyps will contribute in reduced risk of colorectal cancer. A polyp removed is a potential cancer prevented.



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