

The Colon, Polyps, and Cancer

The colon (also called the large intestine) is a long tube with muscular walls that connects the small intestine to the anus. It is part of your body's digestive system. After food digests in the small intestine, the remaining material travels through the colon. The rectum is the last few inches of the colon.

What the Colon Does

The colon is the last step in food digestion. Its primary job is to absorb water from digested material. It forms solid waste (stool) that leaves the body through the anus.

Colon Polyps

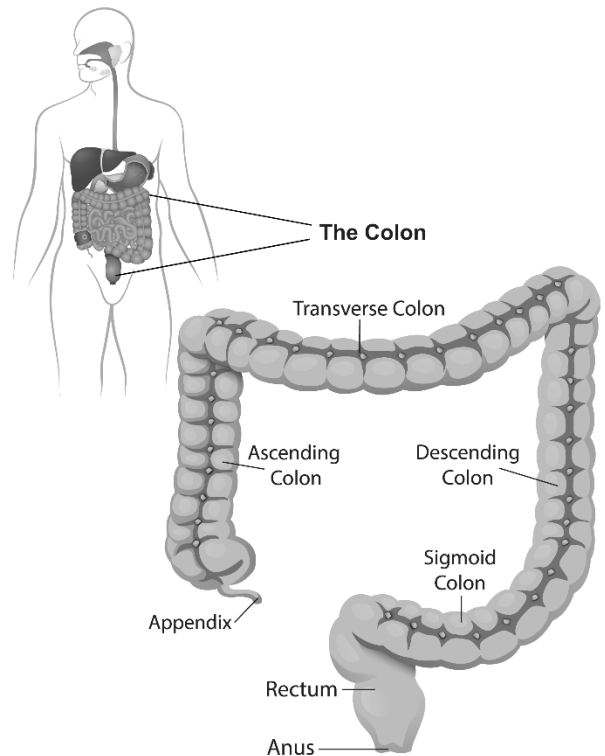
Throughout the body, new cells form to replace old, dead cells all the time. Sometimes new cells form when the body does not need them, or old cells do not die when they should. Extra cells can build up and form a mass of tissue inside the colon called a polyp. Often, doctors can remove polyps during a colonoscopy.

Most polyps are **precancerous**. This means they are not yet cancer, but they can turn into cancer if left untreated.

Benign polyps do not turn into cancer. Once removed, benign polyps do not usually come back. Their cells do not spread to tissues around them or to other parts of the body.

Colon and Rectal Cancer

Cancer that starts in the colon is called colon cancer. Cancer that starts in the rectum is called rectal cancer. These types of cancers are also called colorectal cancer. Cancer cells can invade nearby tissues and organs, and can also break away from the tumor and enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system. That is how cancer spreads from the original (primary) tumor to form new tumors in other organs. The spread of cancer is called **metastasis**.



Signs of Colorectal Cancer

Here are some possible signs of cancer in the colon or rectum:

- Diarrhea or constipation that does not go away
- Feeling that your bowel does not empty completely
- Blood in your stool (either bright red or very dark)
- Stools that are narrower than usual
- Frequent gas pains
- Feeling full or bloated
- Losing weight for no known reason
- Feeling very tired all the time
- Nausea or vomiting

Other health problems can also cause these symptoms. If you have any of these signs of cancer, talk with your health care team right away.