

Sigmoidoscopy: What You Should Know



Before this test, you use a strong laxative and/or enema to clean out the colon. Flexible sigmoidoscopy is conducted at the doctor's office, clinic, or hospital. The doctor uses a narrow, flexible, lighted tube to look at the inside of the rectum and the lower portion of the colon. During the exam, the doctor may remove some polyps (abnormal growths) and collect samples or tissue or cells for more testing. This test is recommended every 5 years. If polyps are found, guidelines indicate that a follow up colonoscopy is recommended. When used together, FOBT is recommended yearly and a flexible sigmoidoscopy is recommended every 5 years.

Sigmoidoscopy is the visual examination of the inside of the distal colon, using a lighted, flexible tube connected to an eyepiece or video screen for viewing. This device is called an endoscope. The colon (large intestine) is 5 to 6 feet long. During a sigmoidoscopy, only the last 1 to 2 feet of the colon is examined. This last part of the colon, just above the rectum, is called the sigmoid colon.

Why the test is performed?

Sigmoidoscopy is performed to diagnose the cause of certain symptoms. It is also used as a preventative measure to detect problems at an early stage, even before the patient recognizes symptoms. The following are some reasons for performing a sigmoidoscopy.

Bleeding -- Rectal bleeding is very common. It often is caused by hemorrhoids or by a small tear at the anus, called a fissure. However, more serious problems can cause bleeding. Benign polyps can bleed. It is important to identify and remove polyps at an early stage before they can become cancerous. Rectal and colon cancers bleed and require immediate diagnosis and treatment. Finally, various forms of colitis and inflammation can cause bleeding.

Diarrhea -- Persistent diarrhea should always be evaluated. There are many causes of diarrhea and the exam is of great help in tracking down the specific cause.

Pain -- Hemorrhoids and fissures are some causes of pain around the anus or in the rectum. Discomfort in the lower abdomen can be caused by tumors. Diverticulosis can occur in the lower bowel. With this condition, small pockets or sacks project from the bowel. If these pockets become infected, the condition is known as diverticulitis.

X-ray Findings -- A barium enema x-ray exam may show abnormalities that need to be confirmed or treated by sigmoidoscopy.

Detection -- Colon cancer is one of the most common cancers in the country. It is highly curable if it is found early. This cancer usually begins in the colon as a polyp that remains benign for many years. Therefore, it is generally advisable to have a sigmoidoscopy after age 40 or 50. If parents, brothers, or sisters have had colon polyps or colon cancer, it is even more critical to have a colon exam. The tendency to develop colon cancer and polyps can be inherited.

Preparation

To obtain the full benefit of the exam and allow a thorough inspection, the rectum and sigmoid colon must be clean. Preparation usually involves drinking clear liquids the day before along with taking enemas and/or laxatives. Specific instructions for preparation are provided beforehand.

Procedure and Results

The procedure takes 15 to 30 minutes. This procedure is most commonly done without sedation. A recovery area is available to monitor vital signs. It is normal to experience mild cramping or abdominal pressure following the exam. This usually subsides in an hour or so.

After the exam, the physician explains the findings to the patient and family. If a sedative is given and the effects of the sedatives are prolonged, the physician may suggest an appointment at a later date. If a biopsy has been performed or a polyp removed, the results of these are not available for three to seven days.

Benefits

The benefits of sigmoidoscopy can include the following:

- It is often possible to determine the specific cause of symptoms.
- Conditions such as colitis and diverticulosis can be monitored to determine effectiveness of treatment.

Polyps and tumors can be discovered at an early stage.

Side Effects and Risks

Bloating and bowel distension are common due to the air inflated into the bowel. This usually lasts only 30 to 60 minutes. If biopsies are done or if a polyp is removed, there may be some spotting of blood. However, this is rarely serious. Other uncommon risks include a diagnostic error or oversight (a small polyp or even a cancer could be missed), or a tear (perforation) of the wall of the colon which might require surgery.

Additional Resources

American Cancer Society

www.cancer.org

Nebraska Colon Cancer Screening Program

www.hhss.ne.gov/crc

For More Information:

Nebraska Colon Cancer Screening Program
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