

Patient education: Colonoscopy (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is a colonoscopy? — A colonoscopy is a test that looks at the inner lining of a person's large intestine. The large intestine is also called the colon ([figure 1](#)).

Often, people have colonoscopy as a screening test to check for polyps or for cancer in the colon or rectum. Polyps are growths in the colon that might turn into cancer. If you have polyps, the doctor can usually take them out during the colonoscopy. Taking polyps out lowers your chances of getting cancer. People can also have colonoscopy if they have any of the symptoms listed below. Cancer screening tests are tests that are done to try and find cancer early, before a person has symptoms. Cancer that is found early often is small and can be cured or treated easily.

Doctors can use 5 or 6 different tests to screen for colon cancer. But most doctors think that colonoscopy is the best test to screen for colon cancer.

When should I have colon cancer screening? — Doctors recommend that most people begin having colon cancer screening at age 50. Some people have an increased chance of getting colon cancer, because of a strong family history or certain medical conditions. These people might begin screening at a younger age.

What are other reasons my doctor might order a colonoscopy? — Your doctor might order a colonoscopy if you have:

- Blood in your bowel movements
- A change in your bowel habits
- A condition called anemia that can make you feel tired and weak
- Long-term belly or rectal pain that you cannot explain
- Abnormal results from a different type of colon test
- A history of colon cancer or polyps in your colon

What should I do before a colonoscopy? — Your doctor will give you instructions about what to do before a colonoscopy. He or she will tell you what foods you can and cannot eat. He or she will also tell you if you need to stop taking any of your usual medicines beforehand. Make sure to read the instructions as soon as you get them. You might have to stop some medicines up to a week before the test.

The colon needs to be cleaned out before a colonoscopy. Your doctor will give you a special drink that causes watery diarrhea. It is important to drink all of it to make sure your colon is clean. If your colon is clean your doctor will get a better look at the inside lining of the colon. A clean colon also makes the

test easier to do and more comfortable. Let your doctor know if you have trouble getting ready for your colonoscopy.

What happens during a colonoscopy? — Your doctor will give you medicine to make you feel relaxed. Then he or she will put a thin tube with a camera and light on the end into your anus and up into the rectum and colon ([figure 2](#)). Your doctor will look at the inside lining of the whole colon.

During the procedure, your doctor might do a test called a biopsy. During a biopsy, a doctor takes a small piece of tissue from the colon. Then he or she looks at the tissue under a microscope to see if it has cancer. Your doctor might also remove growths that he or she sees in the colon. You will not feel it if the doctor takes a biopsy or removes a growth.

What happens after a colonoscopy? — Your doctor will give you instructions about what to do after a colonoscopy. Most people can eat as usual. But most doctors recommend that people do not drive or go to work for the rest of the day. Your doctor will tell you when to start taking any medicines you had to stop before the test.

When should I call my doctor or nurse? — Call your doctor or nurse immediately if you have any of the following problems after your colonoscopy:

- Belly pain that is much worse than gas pain or cramps
- A bloated and hard belly
- Vomiting
- Fever
- A lot of bleeding from your anus

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[Patient education: Colon polyps \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient education: Anemia caused by low iron \(The Basics\)](#)

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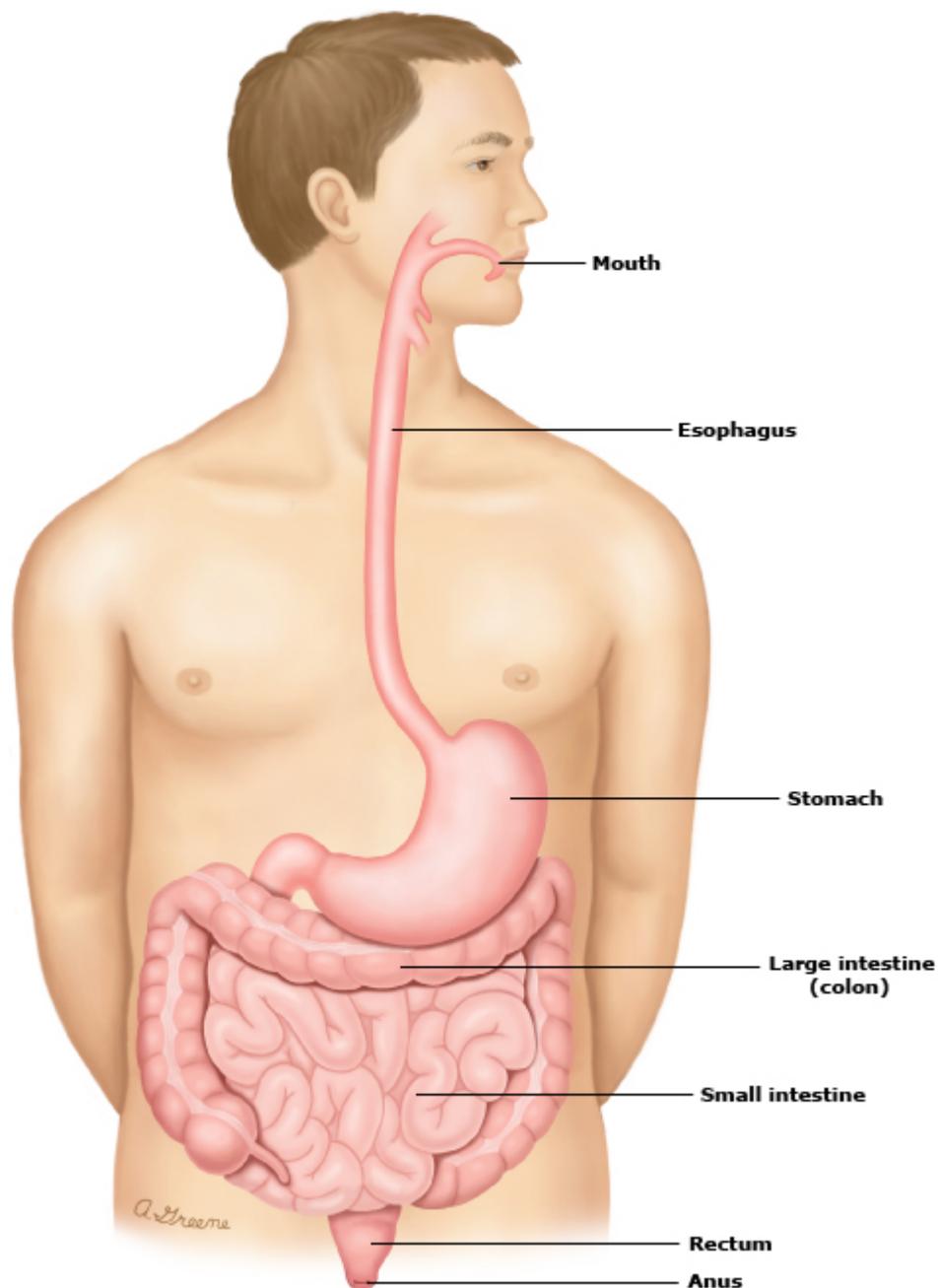
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GRAPHICS

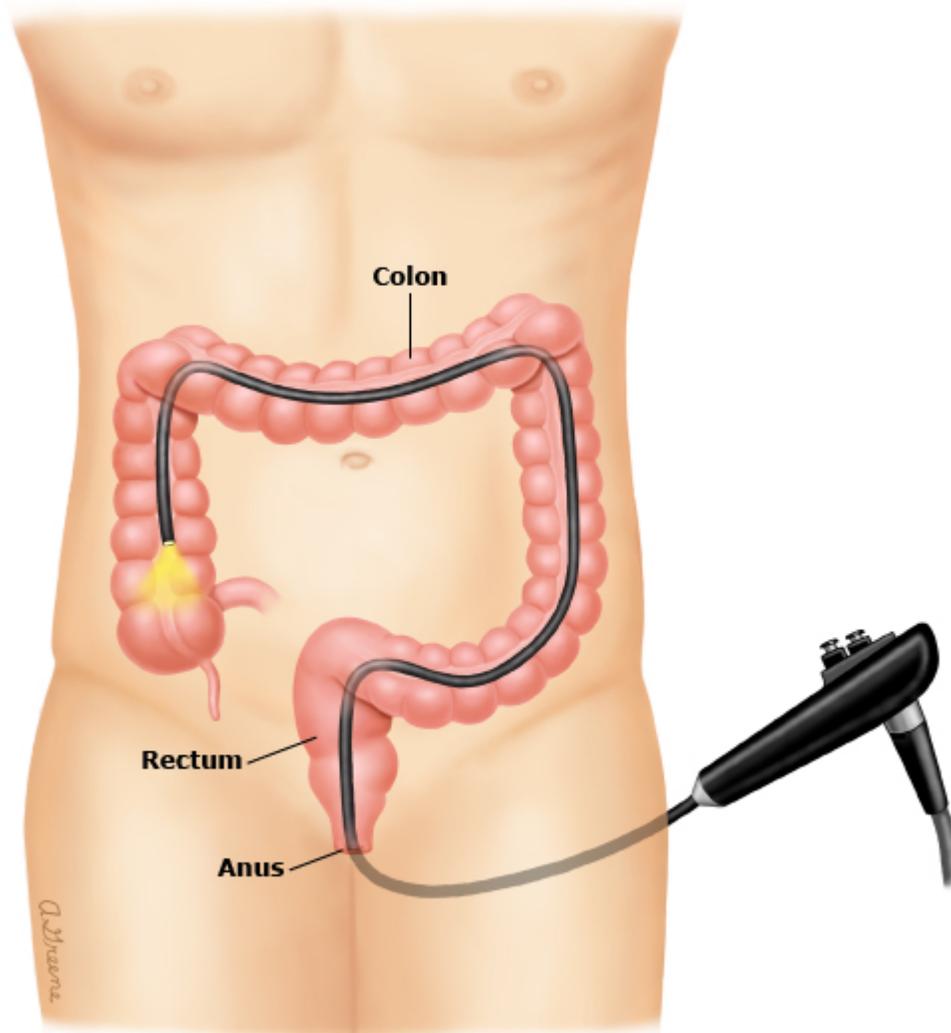
Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called "the digestive system," or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

Graphic 66110 Version 4.0

Colonoscopy



During a colonoscopy, you lie on your side and the doctor or nurse puts a thin tube with a camera into your anus (from behind). Then the doctor or nurse advances the tube into the rectum and colon. The camera sends video pictures from inside your colon to a television screen.

Graphic 52258 Version 4.0