



## POLYPS OF THE COLON AND RECTUM FACT SHEET

### **What is a polyp?**

Polyps are abnormal growths on the lining of the large intestine (colon) or rectum. Some polyps are flat; others resemble a mushroom on a stalk. Polyps are very common. Approximately 15-20% of the adult population will develop polyps at some time.

### **Can polyps lead to a more serious disease?**

Although most polyps are benign, the relationship of certain polyps to cancer is well established.

### **What are the symptoms of polyps?**

Most polyps produce no symptoms. Some, however, can produce rectal bleeding, mucous discharge, a change in bowel habits, and in rare cases, abdominal pain.

### **How are polyps diagnosed?**

Polyps are diagnosed by looking at the colon lining directly (endoscopy) or by an X-ray study (barium enema).

#### **There are three types of colorectal endoscopy:**

1. Rigid sigmoidoscopy (examines the lower 8-12 inches of colon)
2. Flexible sigmoidoscopy (examines lower 1/4 - 1/3 of colon)
3. Colonoscopy (examines entire colon)

Both the rigid and flexible sigmoidoscopy procedures can be comfortably performed in the physician's office. No medication is required.

The colonoscopy is generally performed on an outpatient basis using mild sedation.

### **Do hemoccult tests detect polyps?**

Hemoccult tests involve checking stool samples for hidden blood. However, a positive test does not necessarily mean you have a polyp or cancer. Bleeding hemorrhoids or eating a rare piece of red meat prior to testing can result in a positive test. Negative tests also can occur when a polyp or cancer is present but not bleeding at the time of testing. Only 25% of significant polyps are detected by hemoccult testing.

### **How are polyps treated?**

Since there is no fool-proof way of determining whether a polyp will become cancerous, total removal of all polyps is advised. The vast

## POLYPS OF THE COLON AND RECTUM (continued)

majority of polyps can be removed as a minor outpatient procedure. Some polyps will require surgery if they are large or in a difficult position.

### **Can polyps recur?**

Once a person has had a colorectal polyp, they are likely to grow more polyps. For this reason, it is very important to develop a close relationship with your physician and see him or her for regular examinations at least once a year.

Your physician can discuss polyps in greater detail with you and answer any questions you may have.