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Colorectal Surgery

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Q: I just had a colonoscopy and they found polyps, do I need to worry?

Polyps are abnormal growths on the inside lining of the colon. One common polyp is a hyperplastic polyp, which is essentially harmless. Another polyp type is an adenoma. Adenomas are not harmful in the early stages. If not removed, however, they can degenerate into a colorectal cancer. It usually takes years for an adenoma to develop into cancer. If adenomas are detected early and removed by colonoscopy, your risk of colorectal cancer is dramatically decreased. With appropriate colonoscopy screening, colorectal cancer is one of the few preventable cancers.

Currently, recommendations are to have your first screening colonoscopy at age 50. The timing of subsequent colonoscopies is dependent on the findings. If you have a relative who has a history of colorectal cancer or adenomatous polyps, you should talk to your doctor about the timing of your first colonoscopy, as it may need to be performed at an earlier age.

Sometimes, adenomas are too large to remove with a colonoscopy. These adenomas have a higher risk of developing into a cancer, and surgery may be required. Large adenomas in the rectum (the last part of the colon) can often be removed directly without requiring an invasive surgery. Adenomas higher up in the colon may require an operation to remove a portion of the colon for treatment.

Colorectal cancer is the second most common cause of death from cancer in the United States, but it is preventable. If you are age 50 or have a family history of colorectal cancer or adenomas, talk to your doctor about scheduling a colonoscopy. It could save your life.

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