

Polyps

A polyp is a small protrusion that looks like a ball on the end of a slim stalk and can grow out of the membranes lining various areas of the body. Common sites include the nose, intestines and uterus. Polyps can grow either singly or in clusters. Most are harmless, although a minority may be malignant.

Nasal polyps

These polyps can sometimes grow to the size of an olive, and can interfere with breathing. People with allergies, such as hay fever, are generally more prone to nasal polyps. The lining of the sinuses swells, and certain spots grow more vigorously than usual, forming either a single polyp or a collection. Nasal polyps can trigger infections, such as sinusitis. Symptoms of nasal polyps can include:

- Blocked nostril or nostrils
- Excessive mucus
- Decreased sense of smell
- Headache.

Colorectal polyps

Intestinal polyps commonly develop in the bowel and rectum. The exact cause is unknown, but diet, lifestyle factors and genetics are all thought to contribute. There are two major types of colorectal polyps: adenomas and hyperplastic polyps. Around one in five people have adenomas, to no ill effect. A small percentage of adenomas turn malignant, given sufficient time - particularly the larger ones. Hyperplastic polyps are also quite common. They are usually harmless. However, there is a small risk of cancer if the hyperplastic polyp contains an adenoma. This variety is known as mixed hyperplastic adenomatous polyp. Most colorectal polyps have no symptoms, but possible symptoms can include:

- Blood in the stool
- Clear mucus in the stool
- Diarrhoea or constipation
- Abdominal pain.

Endometrial polyps

Polyps can grow in the lining of the uterus (endometrium). They are relatively rare in young women, and more common in older women. The incidence decreases again after menopause. Polyps can be symptomatic of fibroids, which are non-malignant growths in the muscular walls of the uterus. Symptoms of endometrial polyps can include:

- Irregular menstrual cycle
- Spotting between periods
- Menorrhagia, or excessive bleeding during the period.

Diagnosis methods

Diagnosis can include:

- **Nasal polyps** - the polyps are usually visible inside the nose.
- **Colorectal polyps** - the primary diagnostic procedure is colonoscopy, which involves inserting a specialised instrument into the bowel so the physician can look for polyps. Other techniques include barium meal x-rays.

- **Endometrial polyps** - diagnosis can be made using a number of methods, including examination of a small sample of the uterine lining under a microscope. A hysteroscopy involves the insertion of a specialised instrument into the uterus via the vagina. The hysteroscope is topped with a small camera, which allows the physician to see the endometrium and look for polyps. Other techniques include ultrasound and a specialised x-ray called a hystero-graphy.

Treatment options

Treatment for polyps can include:

- **Nasal polyps** - medications such as cortisone and steroids to hinder growth; surgical removal. If the person has a history of hay fever, then this underlying condition will be treated to help prevent the recurrence of nasal polyps.
- **Colorectal polyps** - the polyps are surgically removed. Sometimes, the polyps can be removed during the colonoscopy with a small 'snare' or hot forcep. The polyps should then be tested for cancer. Complications of polypectomy include excessive bleeding and damage to the bowel.
- **Endometrial polyps** - a surgical technique called curettage is generally used to treat endometrial polyps. The cervix (entrance to the uterus) is gently dilated, allowing the insertion of special instruments. The endometrium and associated polyps are removed.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Nurse on Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Ear, nose and throat specialist
- Gastroenterologist
- Gynaecologist.

Things to remember

- A polyp is a small protrusion that grows out of the membranes lining various areas of the body.
- Common sites for polyps include the nose, intestines and uterus.
- Treatment options depend on the location, but can include surgery.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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