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What is flexible sigmoidoscopy?

Flexible sigmoidoscopy (flex sig) is an examination of the inside of the rectum and the lower part of the colon (large intestine). A flexible, lighted tube called a sigmoidoscopy is inserted into the rectum and advanced into the colon, allowing the doctor to examine the lining of the lower 30 inches of the colon.

Why should I have flexible sigmoidoscopy?

Flexible sigmoidoscopy is done for several reasons. One is to evaluate symptoms, such as rectal bleeding, abdominal pain, or change in bowel habits. Another reason is to detect colon polyps or colon cancer. Most colon cancer begins in polyps (benign growths in the lining of the colon). Studies show that up to 70 per cent of all polyps occur in the lower portion of the colon. If polyps are detected, they are removed in a later procedure, which helps prevent colon cancer.

What preparation is required?

The rectum and lower colon must be completely empty of waste material for the procedure to be accurate and complete. The night before the exam you may eat a light dinner, then clear liquids only until exam. Please administer two enemas (generic brand enema or Fleet, for example), one and one half to two hours prior to your appointment. To administer the enema, follow the instructions provided with the enema. You may purchase the laxative and enemas at any drug store over the counter. Do NOT use an oil retention enema.

What happens during flexible sigmoidoscopy?

You will be kneeling in a "butt up" position on the footrest of the examination table. The doctor will first do a digital exam by inserting a gloved finger into the rectum. The sigmoidoscopy, a flexible instrument about the diameter of a finger, is then inserted into the rectum and advanced into the colon so the doctor can see the lining of the colon. The entire procedure should take no more than five or ten minutes. You will be able to drive yourself home.

When can I get the results from the exam?

The doctor will explain the results immediately following your exam.

What happens after a flexible sigmoidoscopy?

You may have some mild cramping or bloating sensation because of the air that has been passed into the colon during the examination. This will disappear quickly with the passage of gas. You should be able to eat and resume your normal activities after leaving your doctor's office.

Are there any complications from sigmoidoscopy?

Sigmoidoscopy is a safe procedure with very low risk when performed by doctors who are trained and experienced. However, there are rare complications. Notify your doctor if you have any of the following:

- Severe pain
- Vomiting
- Temperature greater than 101 degrees
- Bright, red blood greater than two tablespoons

The American Cancer Society recommends that screening flexible sigmoidoscopy begin at 50 years of age. Your doctor may recommend that you have the examination earlier if you have a family history of colon cancer.