

## Patient Experience Hints & Tips

### Colonoscopy (1)

I've had several colonoscopies over recent years, some done privately (at Clementine Churchill Hospital) and some on the NHS (at St Mark's). There is little difference between the two.

There are a number of reasons why you might be having a colonoscopy. In my case it was initially as I had a change in bowel habit, but I'm also being monitored every few years as my father had bowel cancer in later life. You may also be having the procedure as the routine NHS bowel screening test has shown up an anomaly.

- If you go privately then the procedure will most likely be done by your consultant surgeon. On the NHS the consultant may do the procedure, or it may be a specialist endoscopist.
- There is no dignity in having a colonoscopy; it is possibly the least pleasant and least dignified procedure you'll ever have. Basically your colon has to be emptied, which means you're going to have diarrhoea. This is both stressful and very uncomfortable.
- The hospital will give you detailed instructions and the required drugs. You must follow the instructions to the letter.
- The process starts a few days before the procedure with a very low fibre, very restricted diet.
- The day before the procedure you will be taking some strong laxatives – different hospitals use different laxatives; some are marginally nicer than others but the end result is the same.
- Do use barrier cream on your bottom, otherwise you will get very sore – think nappy rash!
- Within an hour or few of taking the laxatives you will be running to the toilet very frequently; you will have severe diarrhoea and a lot of cramping. This may mean you have a bad night's sleep but the symptoms will hopefully be quietening down by the time you go to the hospital.
- By this stage you will be allowed only water to drink.
- If possible, get a friend to take you to the hospital, and collect you afterwards. You should not drive (even if you feel like it!) as you may have sedation during the procedure; you don't want to be jolted around on public transport; or have the extra hassle of getting taxis.
- Take a change of clothes with you, just in case of accidents.
- During the procedure you will have an endoscope (a small flexible tube) placed into your rectum and slowly fed all the way round your colon. The consultant can pass tiny instruments (light, camera etc.) down this tube to examine the inside of your bowel. If you wish you may be able to watch on a TV monitor what the consultant is seeing.
- This can be extremely uncomfortable (lots of severe cramping) and you may be offered sedation to help you relax and to deaden the pain, while you remain awake. Don't be afraid to ask for sedation if you need it. (I'm lucky in that I've always been able to do without sedation, but many people can't.)
- You may also have drugs to relax the bowel injected during the procedure.
- During the procedure there will be several nurses present with the consultant, and one of them will be with you all the time to ensure you're OK and to help you get into the right positions when required.

- During the procedure the surgeon may find polyps. As these could become cancerous they are usually removed there and then and sent off for biopsy. (I'm lucky, mine have always come back negative.)
  - The whole procedure will take round 20-30 minutes.
  - Afterwards, if you have not been sedated, you will be allowed to recover, usually with tea and biscuits, for 30 minutes or so before being allowed home. If you have had sedation you may well be given longer to recover, and must have someone to take you home.
  - You will probably want to rest for a day after the procedure but you should return to normal within 24-48 hours.
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## Colonoscopy (2)

This is a test carried out as part of a national bowel screening programme if the original stool result was positive or there was a query. Your GP may also request that this be done if there were bowel symptoms that should be investigated.

In my case the stool result from the screening came back as non-conclusive so it was decided to carry out a colonoscopy. This is a test that uses a narrow flexible telescopic camera called a colonoscope to look at the lining of the large bowel.

This was to be carried out at St Mark's Hospital, which is attached to Northwick Park. Prior to the test I was sent tablets with specific instructions; these had to be taken for my bowel to be emptied properly prior to the investigation.

In retrospect I should have gone to the pharmacist to find out the latest lotions and potions applied to a baby's rear end because I think that my red, hot and sore rear end was worse than the entire procedure.

Once the tablets took effect I was back and forth to the loo for many hours. I was "nil by mouth" after midnight leading up to the procedure but I was still traipsing backwards and forwards to the loo.

A friend drove me to the hospital in the morning – I would not have been able to drive myself because I did not know if I was having any anaesthetic. I did not want to take public transport in case I had an "accident".

I took a change of clothes in case but I was fine. By then my trips to the loo had settled down and I was more in control.

I was offered drugs to make me drowsy but I decided against taking anything.

The St Mark's consultants do the colonoscopies themselves so they are very experienced. I only felt a momentary pain on insertion of the colonoscope and after that no pain but slight discomfort knowing that there was "rummaging" going on in the nether regions. I was asked several times if I wanted a drug but I declined.

There were two tiny polyps found and they were removed because they can become cancerous over time. I had signed a consent form prior to the examination but I was kept informed.

I could watch the procedure on a screen and there was a nurse beside me making sure I was comfortable and in the correct position.

After the procedure I was taken to the recovery area and had a cup of coffee and biscuits. As I had not had any drugs I was allowed to get dressed and be driven home by my friend.

I spent a quiet evening at home having had a light supper. My friend had visited a pharmacist and bought something for my rear end as it was on fire.

I had an early night and was fine the next day.

I was fortunate, my biopsy results came back negative.