

Important information about virtual colonoscopy

Facts about bowel cancer

Bowel cancer is the third most common type of cancer in the UK. However, if it's found early enough, it can be treated successfully and most people will be cured.¹

Several things may mean you're more at risk of developing bowel cancer, such as:

- a close relative has had bowel cancer
- having certain diseases of the bowel lining for more than eight years, including ulcerative colitis

You may already have been advised to have regular tests to check for polyps and other early possible signs of bowel cancer if you have any of these risk factors. There are other tests that can look at the inside of your bowel, such as a conventional colonoscopy or a barium enema, however, a virtual colonoscopy has a number of advantages over these. It is less invasive, has fewer complications and is more likely to ensure all areas of the bowel are looked at.

- detecting polyps better than a barium enema
- being as accurate as a conventional colonoscopy
- causing less discomfort than a barium enema or a conventional colonoscopy

What is virtual colonoscopy?

A virtual colonoscopy is a test that allows doctors to look at the inside of your bowel for polyps and signs of cancer. Polyps are small growths that may become cancerous if they aren't removed. A scanner uses X-rays to produce two- and three-dimensional images of your colon and rectum.

The test

A few days before your virtual colonoscopy you will receive an information pack to help you prepare for your test. You may need to follow a special diet for a few days beforehand and take a powerful laxative to make sure your bowel is empty when you go for the test. This is so that your doctor can clearly see the inside of it on the scans.

It's important that you tell your doctor about any medicines that you're taking and if you have any allergies.

You should also tell your doctor if you are, or could be, pregnant. This test isn't recommended for pregnant women.

When you arrive at the centre you may be asked to change into a hospital gown before being taken to the scanning room. You will be asked to lie on a flat bed that moves through a scanner.

A thin tube will be placed in your rectum and air is passed through it into your colon. This makes it easier to see your bowel wall on the scan. When this happens, you may feel pain similar to trapped wind and the urge to go to the toilet. You may pass wind.

Your radiographer will operate the scanner from behind a window. They can see, hear and speak to you throughout the procedure.

Once you're lying in the correct position, the bed will move so the middle of your body is within the ring. You will have X-ray images taken, some with you lying on your back and some lying on your front.

Each image takes a few minutes to do - it's important that you lie very still while they are being taken. You may also be asked to hold your breath for a couple of seconds at certain points during the procedure.

Your results will be sent to the doctor who will be carrying out your health assessment. He or she will discuss them with you at your appointment.

Your test results

When you see the doctor you will be given a CD of the images that were taken of your bowel during the virtual colonoscopy.

If your scan shows that you have polyps, depending on their size, your doctor is likely to recommend that you have them removed in case they develop into cancer. Your doctor will give you information about what treatment options are available to you.

References

¹ Preventing bowel cancer. Cancer Research UK. http://info.cancerresearchuk.org/images/publicationspdfs/leaflet_bowel.pdf, accessed 31 October 2008

