



# ***Internally Yours***<sup>®</sup>

**A Publication  
of Atlanta South  
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## **Rectal Bleeding**

**NUISANCE OR  
WARNING?**

**R**ectal bleeding has many possible causes. Fortunately, most are not harmful. However, it is important to make certain that the bleeding is not a warning sign of a serious underlying condition such as colitis, cancer or a disease which could lead to cancer.

Hemorrhoids are the most common cause of rectal bleeding in adults. Hemorrhoids are dilated, or varicose, veins in the anus, which bleed when irritated by the passage of a bowel movement. Bleeding is the most common symptom of hemorrhoids, and occurs in most patients who have them. The blood may appear as streaks of bright red coating the stool, as free blood in the commode, or as spots of blood on the toilet paper.

Other causes of rectal bleeding include anal fissures, which are small, usually painful, tears in the lining of the anus, and diverticula, which are small pockets in the wall of the colon. Diverticular bleeding may range in severity from minor to severe and life-threatening.

Bleeding associated with diarrhea may signify an infection or an inflammatory condition of the colon such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease.

Medications such as ibuprofen may

cause inflammation of the colon of sufficient severity to result in bleeding.

A less common cause of rectal bleeding in older individuals is angiodysplasia, or abnormal blood vessels in the wall of the colon.

Colon polyps are benign growths, or noncancerous tumors, which can cause rectal bleeding, but which generally cause no symptoms. In fact, most people with colon polyps are not aware that they have them. Although initially benign, a small percentage of polyps will become malignant, or cancerous. For this reason, all polyps should be removed when they are discovered. In this manner, colon cancer can be prevented before it has a chance to develop. Even if cancer has begun in a polyp but is still confined to the polyp, will be cured by removing the polyp at colonoscopy.

Colonoscopy is the most sensitive and accurate test available to investigate the cause of rectal bleeding. The test involves the insertion of a soft, flexible tube through the anus and into the colon. The lining of the colon can be carefully examined. Abnormalities can be photographed, and biopsies (tissue samples) may be taken as needed. Most polyps can be removed entirely during colonos-

copy. Large polyps and malignant growths identified by colonoscopy should be removed surgically.

Individuals known to have hemorrhoids or diverticulosis may develop bleeding from other causes. If the bleeding is mistakenly attributed to hemorrhoids or diverticulosis, the actual cause of bleeding will be overlooked. For this reason, rectal bleeding should always be taken seriously, and reported to your doctor, whether or not you have hemorrhoids or another previously identified condition.

With proper evaluation, most cases of rectal bleeding will prove to be harmless. However, for those few cases where bleeding is caused by a polyp or cancer, early diagnosis is the key to the best chance for a cure.

