



# Flexible Sigmoidoscopy

## What Is A Flexible Sigmoidoscopy?

A flexible sigmoidoscopy, often just called a flex sig, is a special test that allows your doctor to inspect the lining of your rectum and lower part of the colon. In order to see these areas, your doctor will insert a long, flexible, narrow tube with a light and tiny camera attached to it (sigmoidoscope), through your anus and into the rectum and lower part of the colon. During the test, biopsies can be taken from any area that looks abnormal or from any polyps that are found. However, in order to remove any large polyps or abnormal growths a colonoscopy will need to be done. A colonoscopy will also be needed if your doctor wants to see the entire colon.

The procedure can either be done in a hospital or at an outpatient center.

## Why Do I Need A Flexible Sigmoidoscopy?

A flexible sigmoidoscopy is one option that is used to screen for colorectal cancer, the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the US. While most people have a flexible sigmoidoscopy as part of routine cancer screening, it may also be used to evaluate any of the following:

- Blood in your stool
- Rectal bleeding
- Changes in bowel habits
- Persistent abdominal pain
- Follow up of an abnormal result from a CT scan, MRI, barium enema, or stool test
- Iron deficiency anemia (low blood count because of low iron)

It is important to know that a flexible sigmoidoscopy will not allow your doctor to see the entire colon. Depending on your

situation, a colonoscopy may be preferred. It is recommended that you talk with your doctor about which procedure is best for your situation.

## How Do I Prepare For A Flexible Sigmoidoscopy?

Your doctor will give you specific instructions to follow about how to prepare for your procedure. It is important to follow these instructions carefully because if your lower colon is not properly cleaned out, your doctor won't be able to see the lining of the rectum and colon well.

In general, you will be asked to give yourself one or two enemas before the procedure. Depending on the circumstances, you may also be given laxatives or asked to modify your diet. If you are going to need sedation for the procedure, you will be asked to stop eating or drinking anything 6 to 8 hours before your test.

While most medications are safe to take before your procedure, you may be asked to stop taking certain medications. In order for your doctor to decide if any of your medications need to be stopped, it is essential that you let them know all of the medications you are taking, including supplements and herbal remedies.

Most people will be able to drive themselves home after the test. But if you do receive sedation, you will need to have someone go with you to the outpatient center or hospital to drive you home. Be sure to ask your doctor if you will be receiving sedation for your procedure.

If you think you could be pregnant you need to notify your doctor before the flexible sigmoidoscopy.

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## What Can I Expect During A Flexible Sigmoidoscopy?

Before your flexible sigmoidoscopy, your doctor will review your medical history and all of the medications you are taking. The procedure will be explained to you and you will be asked to sign a consent form allowing your doctor to perform the procedure. If you have any questions about the test now is the time to ask them.

If you will be receiving sedation for the procedure, you will have an IV started that allows your doctor to give you light sedation and medication to prevent pain. Although, most people do not need any medication for this procedure.

When you are taken into the procedure room, you will be asked to lie on your side with your knees pulled up to your abdomen. Once your doctor starts the test, you may feel some pressure, bloating, or cramping. You may also feel like you need to have a bowel movement or like you need to pass gas when the scope is put in through your anus. If you do have a biopsy, you aren't likely to feel any pain when it is taken but if you do notice anything, it will likely be some mild cramping.

The entire test usually takes less than 15 minutes.

## What Can I Expect Immediately Following A Flexible Sigmoidoscopy?

If you did not receive any sedation for your procedure, you will be able to go home shortly after the procedure is finished. You should be able to return to your regular activities that day, including returning to work, driving, and eating.

You may feel a bit bloated or have crampy gas pains that are relieved by passing gas but this should go away pretty quickly. If you had a biopsy, you may notice traces of blood in your stool for a few days.

When you are sent home, you will be given a list of instructions on how to care for yourself after the flexible sigmoidoscopy. It is important to follow these instructions.

## How Long Will It Take To Get The Results Of The Procedure?

Some of the results from your flexible sigmoidoscopy will be available right away. Before you go home, your doctor will talk with you about what was found during the procedure and let you know if a biopsy was taken.

If you did have a biopsy, the doctor will send the tissue to the laboratory for an examination. These results can take a few days or more to come back. Once your doctor has a chance to review the results, they may call you to discuss the results or ask you to schedule an appointment to discuss what needs to be done next.

## What Are The Complications Of A Flexible Sigmoidoscopy?

A flexible sigmoidoscopy is a safe procedure and serious complications are rare. Complications that can occur are infection or bleeding. Rarely, a small hole or tear in the rectum or colon can occur that requires immediate surgery to repair.

You should call your doctor right away if you experience any of the following:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Fever greater than 100.4 F
- Rectal bleeding
- Vomiting

## Where Can You Get More Information About Flexible Sigmoidoscopy?

- **American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy**  
<https://www.asge.org/home/for-patients/patient-information/understanding-flexible-sigmoidoscopy>
- **Society of American Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons**  
<https://www.sages.org/publications/patient-information/patient-information-for-flexible-sigmoidoscopy-from-sages/>
- **National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases**  
<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/diagnostic-tests/flexible-sigmoidoscopy>