What are polyps and why are they removed?

Polyps are abnormal growths in the colon lining that are generally benign. There are two main types, hyperplastic and adenomatous. The adenomatous polyps are precancerous, and the hyperplastic ones are not. Most polyps are adenomas, but generally all the polyps are removed. If they are larger than the size of a pea, they are almost always an adenoma. Even though an adenoma is precancerous, it would take most of them a long time (5-10 years) to turn into cancer, though very large ones could turn into cancer faster. It is felt that colon cancer begins as a polyp, so by removing polyps we can prevent cancer. There are no symptoms from polyps, so this is why it is recommended that everyone over age 50 have their colon looked at to look for polyps. If colon cancer does not run in your family, it is generally recommended that you have your colon looked at in one of two ways. You can have half of your colon looked at every 5 years (sigmoidoscopy) and get yearly checks of your stool for blood, or you can have your entire colon looked at every 10 years (colonoscopy). Your doctor can discuss the best method for you, and it can depend upon insurance coverage. Medicare will now pay for the colonoscopy method.

How are polyps removed?
Your doctor might destroy tiny polyps by fulguration (burning) or by removing them with wire loops called snares or with biopsy instruments. Your doctor might use a technique called "snare polypectomy" to remove larger polyps. That technique involves passing a wire loop through the colonoscope and removing the polyp from the intestinal wall using an electrical current. You should feel no pain during the polypectomy.

What if you have had an adenoma?
If you have had an adenoma and it has been completely removed, then the risk of cancer from that polyp is gone. However, you should now get periodic colonoscopies, as you have an increased risk of getting more polyps. Generally after removing polyps you should get another colonoscopy in 3 years, but if there are many polyps your doctor may want you to come back in 1 year. If there are only 1-2 small adenomas, or if your colon has no polyps (after having adenomas in the past), we recommend you come back in 5 years. Remember, hyperplastic polyps are considered normal, but if the polyps are large enough we can generally tell you they are adenomas.

What causes colon polyps?
Nobody knows the answer to this question with certainty, but colon polyps and colon cancer can run in families, so this can increase your risk. Diet plays some role as well. Diets high in fruits, vegetables and calcium and low in saturated fats and meats may offer some protection against colon cancer (as well other cancers and heart disease). However, periodic screening of your colon is the best method we know of to prevent colon cancer, so even with a good diet, periodic sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy is recommended.