

Living with a Colostomy

The digestive system is a group of organs (including the esophagus, stomach, small intestine, colon, rectum and anus) that help the body take in and use food, and pass solid waste material out. As part of the treatment for colon cancer or rectal cancer some people have to have a colostomy. The colostomy allows the stool to bypass the missing or diseased organ. Having a colostomy means you will not pass stool through your anus. A colostomy can be temporary or permanent.

What is a colostomy?

A colostomy is an operation where the doctor makes an opening called a stoma in the abdomen (the area of the body that contains the pancreas, stomach, intestine and other organs). A small portion of the colon is then brought up to the surface of the skin. This new opening allows stool to pass directly out of the body and into an odor-free pouch attached to your skin.

The colon has four sections – ascending colon, transverse colon, descending colon and sigmoid colon. The type of colostomy you have is named for the portion of the colon where the colostomy is. As waste material passes along the length of the colon, more and more water is absorbed, making the stool more solid (or “formed”). How watery or formed your stool will be, and how often you will pass stool, depends upon where your colostomy is.

- Ascending colostomy – located within the ascending (right side) colon. Stool is semi-liquid and may irritate the skin surrounding the stoma.
- Transverse colostomy – located within the transverse colon. Stool is liquid to semi-formed.
- Descending colostomy – located within the descending (left side) colon. Stool is semi-formed to formed.
- Sigmoid colostomy – located within the sigmoid colon. Stool is formed.

How do I care for my colostomy?

After your colostomy, a wound, ostomy, continence (WOC) nurse – a medical professional specially trained in colostomy care – will teach you how to care for your stoma, surrounding skin and pouch.

The stoma: A stoma is shiny, wet and red in color, similar to the inside of your mouth. It is usually round or oval. Right after surgery, the stoma may be swollen. The swelling will go down over time. Because there are blood vessels in the stoma, it may bleed slightly if it is irritated or rubbed. If the bleeding becomes heavy, you should contact your doctor or nurse right away.

The pouch: Pouches are made of a lightweight material that prevents odors from getting out. The pouch can generally not be seen under your clothing. The pouch is attached to a special material (wafer) that sticks to your skin. There are many types of pouches. Your WOC nurse will show you how to attach the pouch to your skin, how to make sure it is closed and how to rinse and/or empty it.

Your skin: The skin around the stoma should not come into contact with the stool. If this happens, the skin may become very sore. Each time you change your pouch, you should clean the skin around the stoma gently with mild soap then rinse it well with water. Bathing and showering may be done with or without the pouch in place; the stoma can be kept uncovered. If you notice redness, swelling or a rash on the skin around your stoma, call your doctor or nurse.

How will life be different after a colostomy?

- **Work:** Having a colostomy should not get in the way of your work. You should avoid heavy lifting, however. You may want to bring extra pouches and a change of clothing to work.
- **Diet:** You should be aware that the ostomy pouch traps intestinal gas caused by food or drink. You may want a pouch with an odor-removing filter so the ostomy pouch stays deflated. If you become constipated or have diarrhea, changing your diet for a while may help. For example, drinking plenty of fluids like water and fruit juice can keep you from being constipated. You should also try to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, and whole-grain breads and cereals. To reduce diarrhea, eat foods that thicken the stool, like bananas, white rice, applesauce, toast, creamy peanut butter and yogurt.
- **Sports and activities:** With your doctor's permission, you can go back to playing almost any sport you enjoyed before your operation. You should not box, wrestle or play football or
 - other rough contact sports without special protection for your stoma.
- **Clothing:** Because of the way pouches are made, they are usually not noticeable under clothing, even swimsuits (a patterned swimsuit will help hide the pouch). Emptying your pouch can often help prevent a bulge that can be seen under your clothes.
- **Personal life:** It is normal to feel uncomfortable about this change in your body. But remember, unless you tell them, people will not know you have had a colostomy. Intimate (sexual) relations will not hurt your stoma. If you feel awkward having your partner see your pouch, you can cover it with specially designed underwear or a pouch cover. Having a colostomy will not affect your chance of becoming pregnant.

Patient Education



How do I get more information?

Additional information is available from:

- Your WOC nurse.
- The Wound Ostomy and Continence Nurses Society, 1-800-224-9629, www.wocn.org
- The United Ostomy Associations of America, 800-826-0826, www.ostomy.org
- Rolf Benirschke Great Comebacks, www.greatcomebacks.com