Colonoscopy: Education about your colon (large Intestine)

About Your Insides
Your digestive system — made up of your mouth, food tube (esophagus), stomach, bowels (intestines), and other organs — helps you break down and absorb food. The last part of your bowels, the large intestine or the colon, is a hollow tube that helps you absorb water and pass bowel movements and other wastes from your body.

Your colon, like other parts of your body, can get cancer. There is no single cause for colon cancer, but nearly all colon cancers begin as non-cancerous polyps. A polyp is a small growth (similar to a skin tag) on the surface of your colon that can turn into cancer. Removing polyps may prevent you from getting colon cancer. If polyps have already become cancerous, catching them early increases your chance of surviving or being cured of colon cancer.

About Colon Cancer

One out of every 16 Americans will get colon cancer. Most people survive colon cancer if it is caught early, and only 5% of people survive colon cancer if it is caught late.

You may be at higher risk for colon cancer if:
- You are older than 45-50
- You have had polyps before
- You have a family history of colon cancer or polyps

You may also be more likely to get colon polyps if you:
- Eat a lot of fatty foods
- Smoke
- Drink alcohol
- Do not exercise
- Weigh too much

Please talk to your doctor about how you can reduce your risk for colon cancer.
How Does a Colonoscopy Work?
The purpose of a colonoscopy is to look inside your colon for polyps, cancers, ulcers, and other conditions. It is important to get a colonoscopy to test for colon cancer once you are 45-50 years of age or older since the disease usually has no symptoms.

Just before the procedure starts, you will receive some medicine to make you sleepy. This medicine (a sedative) will help you avoid discomfort from the procedure. Most people do not remember having the procedure.

The doctor will begin the colonoscopy by examining your rectum to make sure you do not have stool left in your bowels. The doctor will then inflate your colon with a soft stream of air. This will help the doctor get a clear look in your colon. The doctor will then pass an endoscope through your anus and in your colon.

The endoscope is a thin flexible tube that has a light and a camera at the end. Images from the camera go to a TV monitor in the procedure room, allowing the doctor to see the inside of your colon on screen. The doctor will then look for polyps, cancer, or other abnormalities throughout your colon. Your doctor will also remove any polyps that are found. A colonoscopy usually takes around 20-30 minutes to complete.

After the procedure, you will need to recover for about 30-60 minutes until you become more wakeful. You may feel some gas during your recovery caused by the air used to inflate your colon. UVA will require someone to drive you home afterwards. Your driver must be present when you register.

Why Is It Important To Get Cleaned Inside?
Your doctor must be able to see in order to do the test right. If it is dirty on the inside, your doctor may not be able to see important things like polyps or cancer and you may need to do the test again. That means you would have to start over, and nobody wants you to have to do that.

Think of it this way: a clean colon is like driving on a country road on a sunny day. A dirty colon is like driving in a snowstorm.