Colonoscopy Preparation – Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a clear liquid diet?

When someone is instructed to follow a clear liquid diet, they should only drink liquids that they can see through. A good rule of thumb is that a liquid is “clear” if you can see words on a printed piece of paper through it. Some examples of clear liquids include water, plain broth and gelatin. Black coffee is a considered a clear liquid, but coffee with cream or milk is not. Liquids such as milk and orange juice are not clear liquids. Additionally, please remember that you should not drink anything red, as this can be confused with blood.

2. Can I continue to drink liquids after I have started taking the preparation?

Yes, it is OK to drink liquids during the preparation, as long as they are clear and do not contain sugar, which can interfere with the function of the preparation. If your procedure is in the morning, do not drink anything after midnight. If your procedure is in the afternoon, do not drink anything starting 4 hours prior to the procedure (and only clear liquids before). Do not eat anything solid the day before the procedure or the day of the procedure. You will be instructed at the time of your procedure when you may resume eating and drinking normal food.

3. I was told to take magnesium citrate, but I was not given a prescription for it, what should I do?

Magnesium citrate is available over the counter and is available in pharmacies and many grocery stores. It comes in multiple flavors, but you should not get the cherry flavor, because it is colored red.

4. What time should I start to take my preparation?

If you are taking a Halflytely preparation, you should start by taking the two Dulcolax tablets at 3 pm. You should start drinking the Halflytely solution between 5 pm and 8 pm. Try to drink one 8 oz glass every 10 to 15 minutes until the Halflytely is finished. At that rate it will take about two hours to finish the solution.

If you are taking an alternative preparation, such as Nulytely, Golytely, or Colyte, please check the instructions provided with the medication. In general, they will be similar to those for Halflytely.

5. Do I need to take all of the preparation?

While some people’s colons will be cleaned out before they finish all of the preparation, this is highly variable and the odds of having a clean colon are best if
you take all of the preparation. Failure to do so could result in a colon that is not clean enough, which increases the chance that something could be missed. In addition, if the colon is not clean enough, you may have to reschedule your colonoscopy and repeat the preparation.

6. Is there anything I can do to make the preparation easier to take?

Some people find that it is easier to take the preparation if it is cool. You can place the preparation in the refrigerator, or set it on top of ice to cool it. You should not put ice directly into the preparation as it will melt and increase the total amount of fluid that you have to drink.

Some of the preparations come with flavor packets which can be added to improve the taste. Alternatively, you can also flavor the preparation with Crystal Lite (as long as it is not red in color). It is important that you do not add anything to the preparation that contains sugar, as it will interfere with the proper function of the preparation.

7. Will the preparation irritate my hemorrhoids or skin?

Usually not, though in some cases the diarrhea that is caused by the preparation can irritate hemorrhoids. Using moist wipes (baby wipes) instead of toilet paper may help prevent irritation of hemorrhoids or your skin. If your skin is becoming irritated, you can use a moisture barrier such as petroleum Jelly or Desitin to help protect it.

8. When will I start moving my bowels?

Everyone is different. Some people will start moving their bowels within half an hour of taking the Dulcolax, whereas others may have come close to finishing all of the preparation before their bowels start to move.

9. I have taken all of the preparation, but I have not started moving my bowels yet, what should I do?

If you have taken all of your preparation, but have not started moving your bowels there are a few things you can to do encourage the preparation to start working. The first is to get up and walk around if possible. Being more active stimulates the colon and will aid with the preparation. If that does not work, taking a bottle of magnesium citrate (available over the counter) often will do the trick. You should not take magnesium citrate if you have significant kidney disease, a history of congestive heart failure (CHF), or if you have been told by a doctor not to take products that contain magnesium.

10. When will I stop moving my bowels?
Most people stop moving their bowels within a couple of hours of finishing the preparation. However, people are variable and some people will continue to pass liquid bowel movements right up until the time of the procedure. As long as what is coming out is pure liquid it usually is not a problem, since the instruments the doctors use have the ability to suction up left over fluid.

11. I ate solid food the day prior to my colonoscopy, can I still have the procedure?

The answer to this question will depend on the results of your preparation. In most cases, eating solid food the day prior to the exam will result in there being left over solid material in the colon and you may have to have your exam rescheduled. If, however, you are passing just clear liquid prior to your procedure, then you will likely be able to have it.

12. Can I still have my procedure if I continue to pass solid stool despite taking all of my preparation?

If you are still passing solid stool at the time of your procedure, it will likely have to be rescheduled. You may be prescribed an alternative preparation in this case.

13. I am nauseated and having difficulty taking the preparation, what should I do?

Often cooling the preparation liquid or adding a sugar free flavor powder will help with nausea. Additionally, drinking the preparation through a straw will decrease the degree to which you taste it and may help. If you are having nausea you should also try drinking the preparation a little more slowly. For more details see question 6, above.

If those things don’t work, you will need to speak with the covering doctor on call. The covering doctor can be reached at 617-732-6660 (ask for the GI fellow on-call).

14. I started vomiting after taking the preparation, can I still have my procedure?

It depends on two factors. The first is how much of the preparation you were able to take and the second is how well the preparation works for you. If you were able to keep down at least 75% of the preparation and you are passing clear liquid bowel movements, then the preparation is likely adequate. Additionally, if you are passing tinted liquid (yellow or brown), it still may be OK. If you are passing solid stool or if you were able to keep down less than 50 to 75% of the preparation you procedure will likely need to be rescheduled.

15. I am diabetic and take insulin, do I need to adjust my dose?

You likely will need to adjust your dose. You should check with the doctor who prescribes your insulin, as there are many types, and they are all managed
differently. You are welcome to call our endoscopy triage nurse at 617 525-6814 Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM.

16. I was instructed to stop some of my medications (for example iron pills or warfarin) 5 days prior to my procedure, but I forgot to do so, can I still have my procedure?

It depends. In many cases the answer will be yes, though in the case of a medication such as iron, it may interfere with visualization of the colon. If you are taking warfarin (Coumadin), whether the procedure can be performed will depend on what is being done. Removal of a large polyp while on a blood thinner, for example, could result in significant bleeding. The decision to do the procedure if you are still on warfarin will be up to the doctor performing your procedure.

17. I do not have a ride home, can I still have my procedure?

You must have an adult to accompany you home following your procedure. It is not required that they drive you home (for example, it is OK to take a cab or the bus), but he or she must be with you until you arrive safely home. If you do not have someone to accompany you home, you will not be able to have your procedure.

18. I have a cold, is it OK for me to have my procedure?

In most cases, yes. If you have significant underlying lung disease, or if you think you have something more serious than just a normal “head cold”, you should speak with a physician.

19. I currently have my period, is that a problem?

No, it is safe to have a colonoscopy while you are having your period and it will not interfere with the exam.