

Is sedation needed for colonoscopy screening?

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The answer to this question remains unknown and probably varies between countries. What we do know is that the use of sedation varies more between countries than any other aspect of the performance of endoscopy. Thus, we have some countries, such as Finland and Norway, which only rarely use sedation for colonoscopy. Other countries, such as France, use primarily general anesthesia, whereas the UK uses primarily moderate sedation with narcotics and benzodiazepines. The United States is in the process of a fairly rapid and very controversial transition from moderate sedation with endoscopist administered narcotics and benzodiazepines to mostly anesthesiologist administered propofol. We also know that in a number of situations motivated patients can undergo colonoscopy with fairly high completion rates in the unsedated state. However, in the United States patients who undergo unsedated flexible sigmoidoscopy are much more likely to say they will never return for another examination, compared to persons undergoing sedated colonoscopy. An important factor missing from discussions of whether sedation is needed for colonoscopy screening is that we have no data on the reputation of colonoscopy among persons who have never been previously screened according to the sedation practices in a given country. I certainly am convinced that colonoscopic screening could not have come anywhere near as far as it has in the United States without the use of sedation, since the procedure would have such a negative public reputation. Countries in which the practice of unsedated colonoscopy is routine need to evaluate how the reputation of colonoscopy in these countries will impact adherence to screening.