

Health Tips

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with

Dr. D



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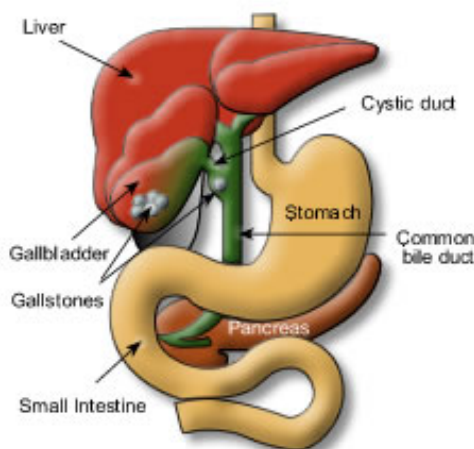
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Health Tip: Gallstone Disease

The gallbladder is a sac located beneath the liver that stores and concentrates bile. Bile is produced in the liver and helps in the digestion of fats in the diet. The most common type of gall bladder disease is caused by gall stones (cholelithiasis). Gallstones are clusters of solid material that form in the gallbladder. The most common type of gall stone is composed mostly of cholesterol, but there are stones that are made of bilirubin, a pigment found in blood, and made of calcium also.



The reasons that gall stones form in the first place can be because of too much cholesterol in the bile, not having enough bile salts (a detergent-like component of bile) or when the gall bladder has problems emptying. Gallstones can be singular or multiple, as large as a ping-pong ball or as small as grain of rice. Gall stones are thought to affect up to 15% of the population of the United States, but most of these people do not have symptoms or even know that they have gall stones. Nevertheless, about

800,000 hospitalizations and more than 500,000 operations each year in the United States result from gall stone-related problems.

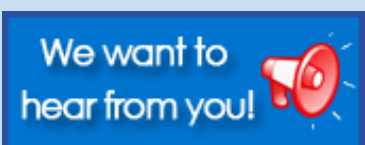
How do you know if you have gallstones? Symptoms related to gall stones usually present in one of three ways. The mildest and most common symptom of gallbladder disease is intermittent pain called biliary colic. Also known as a gallbladder "attack," biliary colic is a steady ache that is felt in the right upper aspect of the abdomen, beneath the rib cage that sometimes radiates to the upper back. Biliary colic is usually triggered by eating a large or fatty meal and comes on a few hours after eating.

In some cases, inflammation or infection develops when stones obstruct the outlet to the gall bladder, a condition is known as "acute cholecystitis". The pain of acute cholecystitis is similar, although more severe and persistent, than biliary colic. Other symptoms of acute cholecystitis include nausea, vomiting, chills and fever. Longstanding gallbladder disease, known as chronic cholecystitis, is marked by the presence of gallstones, low grade inflammation

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and poor function of the gall bladder. In this variant of gall stone disease, the primary symptoms are gas, nausea and abdominal discomfort after meals.

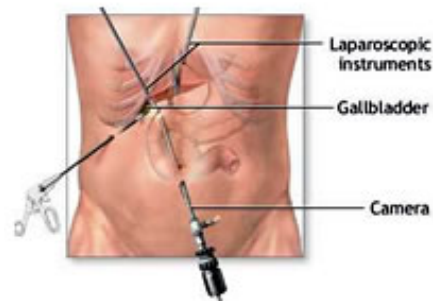
How are gallstones diagnosed? The most common test performed to diagnose gall stones is an ultrasound. This non-invasive test involves bouncing sound waves off the gall bladder and creating an image of the gall bladder on a video monitor. Other tests that may be performed when evaluating for gall bladder disease include blood tests performed to look for signs of infection, obstruction, or jaundice.

How are gallstones treated? Sometimes gallstones are found by accident when performing tests for other reasons.

These stones are called "silent stones" and since they cause no symptoms, they don't require treatment. In those with frequent gallbladder attacks, removal of the gallbladder, an operation called a cholecystectomy is usually recommended.

The technology for performing this procedure has improved greatly in recent years, with most of them being performed through a laparoscope rather than requiring a large surgical incision.

Since the gallbladder is, for the most part, a non-essential organ, most people have no untoward effects following its removal. Medications (Actigall, Chenix) are occasionally used to treat gallstones, however, this method of treatment works best for smaller stones and it can take months for the stones to dissolve.



Can gallstones be prevented? Gallstones are more common among older adults; women; people with diabetes; those with a family history of gallstones; people who are overweight, obese, or undergo rapid weight loss; and those taking cholesterol-lowering drugs. Of these, the risk factor that we have most control over is being overweight. Be aware, however, that weight cycling (losing and regaining weight repeatedly) or measures to lose weight rapidly, such as bariatric surgery, may increase the risk of developing gallstones. Losing weight gradually, instead of losing a large amount of weight quickly, lowers your risk.

While biliary colic is often more of a nuisance than a medical emergency, for a couple of reasons it is best to see your doctor if you suspect that you have gallstones. First, since symptoms of gallstones can mimic those of other problems, including a heart attack, an accurate diagnosis is important. Secondly, a small percentage of those with a gallstone attack will have obstruction of the gall bladder, a problem that can be life-threatening if not treated aggressively.

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