

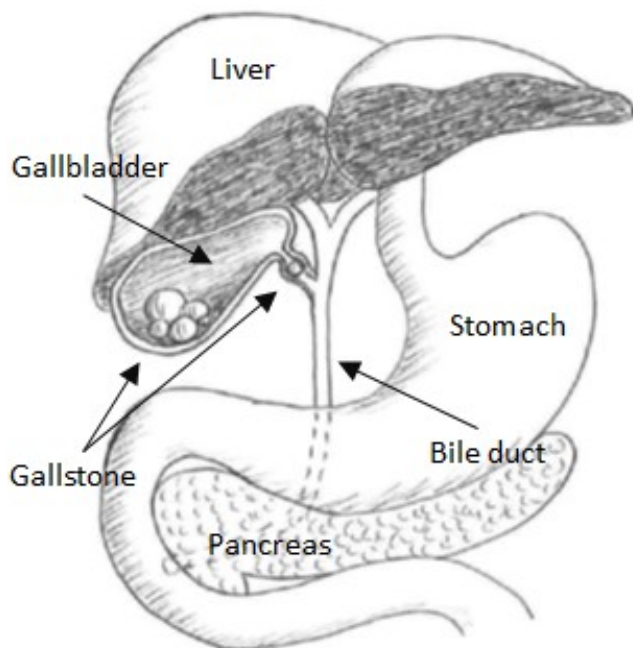
Gallstones

What are Gallstones?

Bile is stored in the gallbladder, which is a pouch around 10cm long located in the upper right of the abdomen (tummy) – under your liver.

When you eat, the gallbladder squeezes this bile into your intestines to help digest the food. Bile is most important for the digestion of fatty foods. Usually the bile is a greenish liquid but when it gets thickened and forms lumps, they are called gallstones and may vary in size and number.

Most gallstones are cholesterol stones (80%) whilst the rest are pigment stones. Lots of people have gallstones and aren't aware of it.



Why do I have Gallstones?

You are more likely to get gallstones as you get older, if you are pregnant, on the contraceptive pill or if you have recently lost weight very quickly.

Also, people who are overweight, lead inactive lives, have diabetes or a family history of gallstones are at risk.

What problems can Gallstones cause?

Gallstones are very common - as many as 1 in 6 people will have a gallstone at some point in their lives and they are twice as common in women as in men.

Most people with gallstones are unaware that they have them, as they produce little or no symptoms. However, for some people gallstones can cause problems. Some of the more common problems include:

Biliary Colic is a bout of sudden severe pain in the abdomen when one of your stones moves and gets stuck in the narrow tube (bile duct) coming out of your gallbladder causing the gallbladder to squeeze harder to try to push the stone through. The pain can last from minutes to hours, can be associated with nausea and vomiting and usually resolves if the stone is able to be dislodged.

Cholecystitis refers to the thickening or inflammation of the gallbladder when a stone gets completely stuck in the bile duct. Pain from Cholecystitis usually does not go away and is often associated with fever. Cholecystitis is a serious condition and requires emergency treatment in hospital.

Treatment for Cholecystitis will often consist of pain relief, antibiotics and intravenous fluids while the gut is rested. If not treated, Cholecystitis can worsen and the gallbladder can burst – a life threatening condition. Sometimes people require an operation whilst they are in hospital to remove the gallbladder.

Other: Gallstones can also cause blockages further down the ducts, potentially leading to jaundice (yellowing of the skin), infections of the bile ducts or pancreatitis each of which requires urgent in-hospital care.

Gallstones

How do I find out if I have Gallstones?

Gallstones are usually found on ultrasound however can be seen with other tests such as Computerised Tomography (CT) or MRI.

Often gallstones are found accidentally when a test is ordered by your doctor for another reason – unless they are causing you problems you need not worry about them.

What options do I have for treatment?

Often gallstones require no treatment however, sometimes other options including surgery must be considered.

Surgery is recommended as the best treatment for people with recurrent painful gallstones and is done preferentially as keyhole surgery, (known as laparoscopic surgery) or you may need to have open surgery if your case is more complicated.

You can have a healthy life without your gallbladder and 9 out of 10 people find that their gallstone pain goes away after surgery.

Lots of people have surgery to remove their gallbladder but no procedure is without risks.

Your doctor will discuss with you the risks of both having the operation as well as any alternatives available to you.

Seeking help in an emergency:



In a medical emergency go to your nearest emergency department or call 000.

What can I do to help in the meantime?

If you are trialling non-operative therapy or whilst you are on the waiting list for surgery, there are a number of steps you can take to reduce the chance of having further painful episodes or indeed suffering from other complications of gallstones. These are:

- Eating a healthy balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables
- Gradual weight loss aiming for a healthy weight (avoid crash diets)
- Drink plenty of fluids to keep hydrated
- Limit the amount of caffeine and alcohol you consume
- Keeping a diary of food and symptoms may help you identify these “trigger foods”
- Avoid fatty foods and excess oils when cooking as these make the gallbladder squeeze and can bring on a painful episode.

When should I seek help?

You should see your doctor if you have pain that:

- is not able to be controlled using simple pain relieving medications (like paracetamol or ibuprofen),
- does not go away after a few hours,
- is associated with a fever,
- stops you eating and drinking normally; or
- if you have any other concerns about your health and wellbeing.