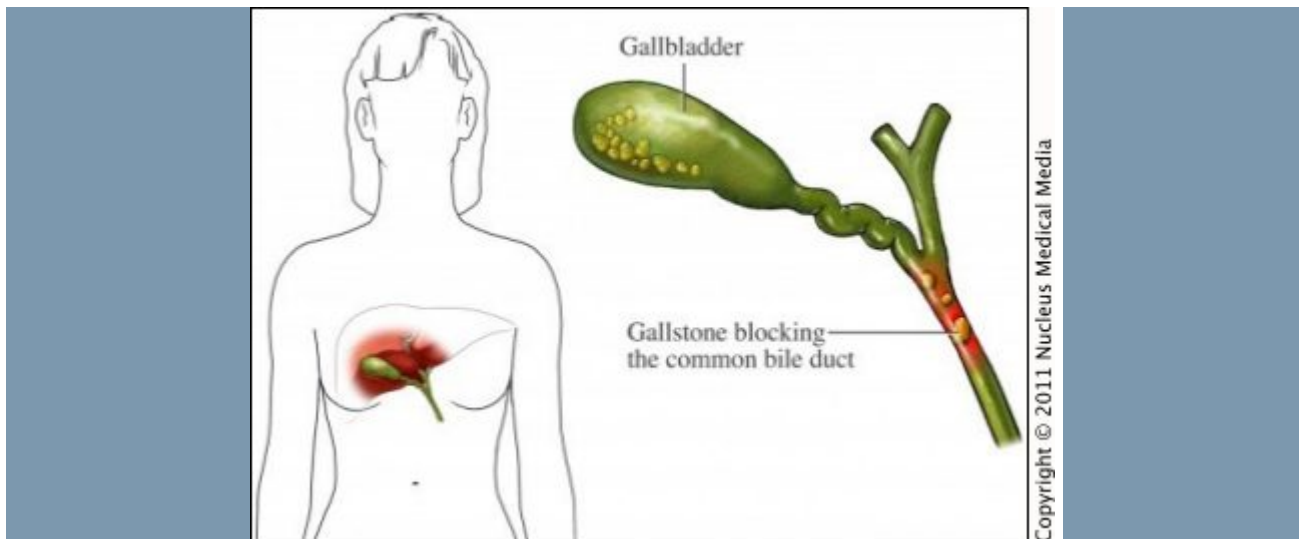


Gallstones

Overview

What are gallstones?

The gallbladder is an internal organ just under your liver. It stores the digestive fluids that are made by the liver. Sometimes these fluids become solid and form stones, called gallstones.



Symptoms

What problems can gallstones cause?

Most people who have gallstones never experience any symptoms. They might never even know they have gallstones.

Sometimes, a gallstone can leave your gallbladder and go into the passageway from your gallbladder to your intestine. If a gallstone gets stuck in that passageway and blocks it completely, you will have severe pain in the right upper part of your belly. You may also feel pain in your upper back. The pain usually starts suddenly and lasts for several hours. This is known as a gallbladder attack.

Complete or partial blockage can also cause your gallbladder to get irritated and inflamed. If this happens, you will usually have pain that lasts several hours. You may also develop a fever. Your skin may turn a yellowish color, known as jaundice (say "john-diss"). You may vomit or feel nauseous.

Causes & Risk Factors

Who gets gallstones?

You're more likely to get gallstones if:

- You are a woman
- You are more than 60 years of age
- You are of American Indian or Mexican descent
- You have diabetes
- You have a family history of gallstones
- You are pregnant
- You are taking birth control pills
- You eat a diet high in cholesterol
- You are overweight or obese
- You are on a low-calorie diet and have recently lost weight very quickly

Treatment

How are gallstones usually treated?

You and your doctor will talk about your situation and decide what is right for you. If you have gallstones but no pain, chances are good that the stones won't be a problem for you. Your doctor might suggest you leave them alone.

Once you have one gallbladder attack, the chance of having another one is high (about 70%). Many doctors will suggest surgery to remove your gallbladder to prevent a future attack. If your gallbladder is irritated or inflamed, most doctors will want to take it out right away. The surgery is safe and effective. Without surgery, the gallbladder can get infected. It might even burst open, causing further problems.

Are there other treatments?

Other treatments are available for people who would have a high risk in surgery because they are elderly or have heart problems or lung disease. However, gallstones usually return when they are not treated with surgery.

Your doctor might be able to use sound wave therapy to break up the stones so they can move into the intestine without problem. However, not everyone can receive this treatment. If you have more than 1 gallstone, if your gallstone is large or if you have other medical conditions, you may not be able to receive sound wave therapy.

You might also take a pill to dissolve the stones. This pill does not work for all people and can be very expensive. Surgery is still the best way to cure gallstones. Talk with your doctor about what is right for you.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- Will I need surgery to remove my gallstone? Are there other options?
- Am I at risk of having another gallstone?
- Are there lifestyle changes I can make to prevent gallstones?
- What should I do if I have a gallbladder attack?
- Is having a gallstone a sign of another condition?

Source

Management of Gallstones and Their Complications by A Ahmed, M.D., RC Cheung, M.D., and EB Keefe, M.D. (*American Family Physician* March 15, 2000, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20000315/1673.html>)

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