

PATIENT INFORMATION

Non-specific Abdominal Pain

Non-specific abdominal pain refers to abdominal pain which has no clear cause or diagnosis. Abdominal pain is extremely common, representing around 50% of emergency surgical presentations, and in around half of these cases no clear cause will be found. You may hear other terms used, such as 'functional', which means that no physical disease has been found.

How do you diagnose non-specific abdominal pain?

This is described as a 'diagnosis of exclusion', meaning that physical causes of pain have been ruled out.

Firstly, you will have had a thorough history of your pain taken by the surgical team, followed by a comprehensive examination of your abdomen. After this initial step, you will likely have had routine tests, including a urine dip and blood tests.

For many patients, if the history, exam and routine tests are reassuring, this is all you will need. For some patients imaging may be used, usually in the form of an ultrasound, a CT scan or endoscopy – where a camera on a thin tube is used to study the inside of your abdomen, stomach or bowels.

How do you treat non-specific abdominal pain?

Whilst no cause has been found for your pain, it does not mean that nothing can be done. Most cases of non-specific abdominal pain settle within 4-6 weeks.

Perhaps the most important point to take away is that we have ruled out the more serious causes of abdominal pain.

Dietary changes can help in some cases, for example cutting down food or drinks high in caffeine, fatty foods and spicy foods may help to ease pain.

Simple analgesia, such as paracetamol and codeine, is the mainstay of treatment and should help to keep pain under control. Other medications that may be used include antispasmodics, such as Buscopan, anti-reflux medications, such as Gaviscon, and some antidepressants.

What if my pain gets worse or I develop other symptoms?

If you are unable to manage your pain at home, if it is not settling within 4 weeks, or if you develop more symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea, bleeding from the back passage, please seek further medical help – whether that be with your GP or here at the hospital if you are especially concerned.

For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.