

PATIENT INFORMATION

Gallstones

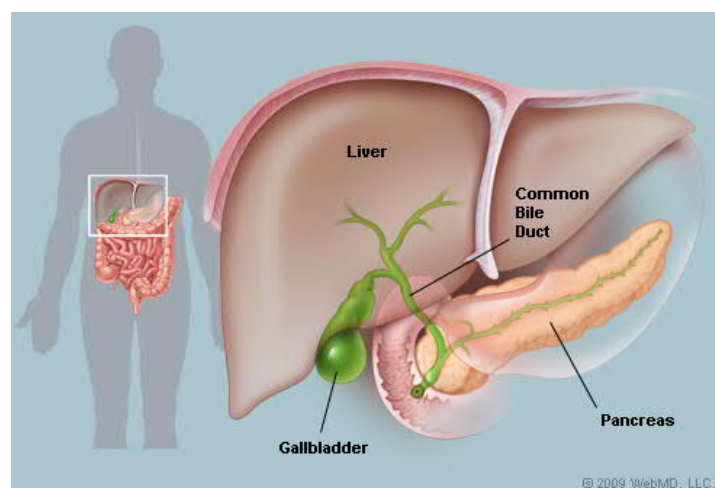
The gallbladder is a small pouch-like organ which sits underneath the liver. Its function is to store and concentrate bile, a liquid which helps to break down fats in our diet. It is released after eating a meal.

What are gallstones?

Around 1 in 10 adults in the UK has gallstones. They are thought to develop due to an imbalance in the chemical makeup of the bile. Most commonly, excess cholesterol solidifies into stones.

You are more at risk of developing gallstones if you are:

- Overweight or obese
- Female (particularly if you have had children)
- Aged 40 or over (the risk increases as you get older)



What are the symptoms of gallstones?

Usually, gallstones do not cause any symptoms and do not require any treatment. However, around 1 in 3 people will develop symptoms which may include:

- Severe pain in the upper part of the tummy (abdomen), often on the right side, also known as **biliary colic**. This happens when a stone becomes lodged at the entrance to the gallbladder, which squeezes and contracts against the blockage, causing pain. This pain may last minutes to hours, and may flare up from time to time, especially after a fatty meal.
- If the gallbladder becomes inflamed due to gallstones, infection can develop. This is called **cholecystitis**. You may feel generally unwell and have a high temperature.

- Sometimes a gallstone escapes the gallbladder and passes into the common bile duct which connects the liver and gallbladder to the bowel. This may block the system causing bile to build up, which may cause yellowing of the skin (**jaundice**). The stone may also cause inflammation of the pancreas, called **pancreatitis**. This causes upper abdominal pain and can be severe if left untreated.

How do you diagnose gallstones?

In many cases your symptoms, combined with tenderness in the upper right side of your abdomen, will alert the doctor that this is likely to be gallstones. Blood tests and an ultrasound scan are the most common investigations used to confirm the diagnosis.

How do you treat gallstones?

Usually, gallstones require no treatment. A strict low-fat diet will help to prevent flare ups. However, if you get symptoms frequently, or have any of the complications listed above, we may recommend surgery to remove the gallbladder. Keyhole surgery is the most common way to do this, also known as a laparoscopic cholecystectomy. This involves several small cuts, and a small camera is used to perform the operation. There is a low risk of complications with this surgery. Sometimes open surgery is required where a larger cut is made to access the gallbladder. Other procedures may be required if a stone is stuck in the bile duct.

What happens after surgery?

You do not need a gallbladder to digest food. Bile will drain straight into the bowel rather than being stored in the gallbladder. Some patients experience bloating or mild pain from time to time, and a low-fat diet can help to prevent this. Other people may experience mild diarrhoea after surgery, which can be controlled with medication. The majority of people lead a normal life following gallbladder surgery.

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