

Gallstones Explained

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Introduction

Gallstones are solid lumps or stones that form in the gallbladder or bile duct. They are formed when some of the chemicals stored in the gallbladder harden into a mass. Gallstones and kidney stones are not related. They are formed in different areas of the body.

Gall Bladder

The gallbladder is a small bag-shaped organ on the right-hand side of the body, just below the liver. It stores green liquid called bile, which is produced by the liver to help the body digest fats and other substances.

Bile duct: When we eat, bile is released from the gallbladder into the intestines through a narrow tube called the bile duct.

Types of Gallstones

There are two basic types of gallstones:

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Cholesterol gallstones are formed when there is too much cholesterol in the bile. Cholesterol gallstones are usually yellowish-green in colour.

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Pigment gallstones are small and dark, and form when there is excess bilirubin in the bile. They tend to develop in people who have liver disease, infections in the bile tubes or hereditary blood disorders such as sickle-cell anaemia.

Causes of Gallstones

The factors that contribute to getting gallstones include:

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Age: People over age 60 are more likely to develop gallstones than younger people.

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Cholesterol-lowering drugs: Drugs that lower cholesterol levels in blood actually increase the amount of cholesterol secreted in bile. This in turn can increase the risk of gallstones.

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Diabetes: People with diabetes generally have high levels of fatty acids called triglycerides. These fatty acids increase the risk of gallstones.

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Gender: Women between 20 and 60 years of age are twice as likely to develop gallstones as men.

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Rapid weight loss: As the body metabolizes fat during rapid weight loss, it causes the liver to secrete extra

cholesterol into bile, which can cause gallstones.

- Fasting: Fasting decreases gallbladder movement, causing the bile to become over concentrated with cholesterol, which can lead to gallstones.

- Estrogen: Excess estrogen from pregnancy, hormone replacement therapy, or birth control pills appears to increase cholesterol levels in bile and decrease gallbladder movement, both of which can lead to gallstones.

Gallstones are also associated with certain medical conditions including:

- Diabetes
- Liver disease
- Crohn's disease
- Blood disorders like sickle-cell anemia
- Stomach surgery

Symptoms of Gallstones

Symptoms of gallstones are often called a gallstone "attack" because they occur suddenly.

- A typical attack can cause steady pain in the upper abdomen that increases rapidly and lasts from 30 minutes to several hours.

- Pain in the back between the shoulder blades.

- Pain under the right shoulder.

- Nausea or vomiting.

- Gallstone attacks often follow fatty meals, and they may occur during the night.

Other gallstone symptoms include:

- Abdominal bloating

- Recurring intolerance of fatty foods

- Colic

- Belching

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- Gas
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- Indigestion

Treatment of Gallstones

Surgery

Surgery to remove the gallbladder is the most common way to treat symptomatic gallstones. (Asymptomatic gallstones usually do not need treatment.) The surgery is called cholecystectomy.

Non-Surgical Treatment

Nonsurgical approaches are used only in special situations, such as when a patient has a serious medical condition preventing surgery and only for cholesterol stones. Stones usually recur after nonsurgical treatment.

Oral Dissolution Therapy

Drugs made from bile acid are used to dissolve the stones. The drugs, ursodiol (Actigall) and chenodiol (Chenix), work best for small cholesterol stones. Months or years of treatment may be necessary before all the stones dissolve. Both drugs cause mild diarrhea, and chenodiol may temporarily raise levels of blood cholesterol and the liver enzyme transaminase.

Contact Dissolution Therapy

This experimental procedure involves injecting a drug directly into the gallbladder to dissolve stones. The drug-methyl tertbutyl ether-can dissolve some stones in 1 to 3 days, but it must be used very carefully because it is a flammable anesthetic that can be toxic. The procedure is being tested in patients with symptomatic, noncalcified cholesterol stones.

Specific Foods to Avoid Gallbladder Attacks

Eggs, pork, onion, fowl, milk, coffee, citrus, corn, beans, nuts, in that order.

Good Foods for the Gall Bladder

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- Vegetable Juices - Beet and cucumber are especially helpful to gallbladder.
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- Other green vegetables like tender baby greens, Swiss chard, dandelion greens, beet greens, celery, carrots - avoid the cabbage family)
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- Avoid all fruit juices except organic grape juice and organic apple (self-juiced is best)
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- Fiber such as found in fruits and vegetables and guar gum and oat bran.

Disclaimer: Our goal is to provide you with information that may be useful in attaining optimal health. Nothing in it is meant as a prescription or as medical advice.