



## More than a stomach ache: recognizing gallbladder pain

By Deanna Huntwork, DO



Gallbladder pain is no regular stomach ache. Learning to recognize this specific type of pain can save you many trips to the emergency room and a number of diagnostic tests.

Gallbladder pain usually comes on suddenly and unexpectedly. It is described as a strong burning pain located primarily in the upper right to upper middle abdomen. The pain often radiates to the right shoulder or through to the back and may be accompanied by nausea and a lot of gas. The pain often comes on a short time after eating a fatty meal.

An estimated 20 million Americans have some form of gallbladder disease. Because humans can live without a gallbladder, around 500,000 people in the United States have this small, pear-shaped organ removed each year. Amazingly, the liver then takes up the function of the gallbladder.

Most folks don't think much about their gallbladder until it begins acting up. The gallbladder is about four inches long and is attached to the liver by tiny bile ducts. The gallbladder stores bile, which is made by the liver. The gallbladder releases the bile into the gut to help digest your food.

One of the most common gallbladder problems I see is gallstones.

Gallstones, which are calcified chunks of cholesterol and bilirubin, are formed when the gallbladder doesn't empty properly, creating a stagnant environment. They can be painful, especially if they pass out through or get stuck in the bile ducts. However, a person could have gallbladder problems even before stones form.

Stones, especially the larger ones, can irritate the lining of the gallbladder and cause acute infection. In this case, urgent medical care is needed, including antibiotics. Gallstones can be easily seen with an ultrasound. In patients who have not formed stones yet, a functional test called a HIDA Scan can detect problems.

For those wishing surgery, there is a minimally invasive technique, which I use, that cuts down recovery time and is generally less painful than open surgery. A scope, which helps me see inside the belly, is inserted through a series of small incisions. The scope helps me lead my instruments to the gallbladder where I can remove it through one of the incisions, thus avoiding major surgery.

Who is at high risk for gallstones? Studies show folks who don't exercise, are obese or have experienced rapid weight loss suffer from stones more often than those with a healthy lifestyle including a moderately-low fat diet and exercise. A key group of concern is women over the age of 40, especially if they're overweight.

If you think you are suffering from gallbladder pain, talk to your family physician or call me at (509) 725-6560 for a consultation. If you'd like to work on lowering your cholesterol, check out my cholesterol lowering Apple Bran Muffin recipe by logging on to my website [www.spikelight.com](http://www.spikelight.com).

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