

# How to tell if that stomach pain is serious

Persistent pain, cramping or bloating after a heavy meal could be signs of gallstones and may require surgery, says general surgeon Dr Chan Chung Yip

A tiny organ on the right of your abdomen, the gallbladder stores bile produced by the liver. It will then release this bile into the intestines to break down fats.

There are also times when gallstones may form in the gallbladder. These are fairly common occurrences and are no cause for alarm if there are no noticeable symptoms.

It is when they start causing discomfort that surgery may be necessary. Dr Chan Chung Yip, general surgeon at Mount Alvernia Hospital, shares more.

## Q How do gallstones form and how are they diagnosed?

Gallstones are made of either cholesterol or bile pigments, or both. They develop when there is an excess of these in the gallbladder.

In addition, calcium can be deposited, which hardens these clumps to form stones.

Women and those who are overweight are at higher risk of having gallstones, as well as those with a blood disorder that increases the turnover of red blood cells.

Gallstones usually go undetected until discovered in scans during health screenings.

## Q My recent scan revealed gallstones. Is gallbladder surgery necessary?

Surgery is recommended if there are symptoms or conditions arising from the gallstones.

Symptoms that one may experience include a cramping pain in the upper middle and right side of the abdomen after a heavy meal, or bloating and indigestion after a fatty meal.

Gallstones can also cause a number of problems, like infection of the gallbladder, blockage of the bile duct, as well as inflammation of the pancreas. In such cases, removal of the gallbladder is recommended.



Persistent cramping and bloating in the abdomen after a heavy meal may be a sign of gallstones. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Surgery may also be necessary for large polyps and if there is a possibility of gallbladder cancer.

## Q I will be undergoing gallbladder surgery. What is the procedure like?

The operation to remove the gallbladder is called a cholecystectomy. It is often done through laparoscopy, a minimally invasive form of surgery, that is safe and simple to perform.

In a small number of cases, open surgery via a bigger incision may be required if the gallbladder is severely inflamed.

The surgery is conducted under general anaesthesia, and can be completed within an hour. Most patients can be discharged the next day.

Following discharge from hospital, patients should be able to perform most light activities, but should refrain from carrying heavy loads to allow optimal healing of the wound. Fatty food should be avoided, though it can be gradually introduced over the following weeks.

## Q Is it possible to live without a gallbladder and how will my life be affected?

The gallbladder is a storage organ for bile. Following removal of the gallbladder, bile is still stored in the bile ducts, and is released in response to a meal. Digestive function is mostly unaffected.

The most common side effect of gallbladder surgery is bowel urgency soon after a meal. This only affects a small number of patients and, most times, is temporary and resolves within a couple of months.



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