

Gallstones

What are gallstones?

The gallbladder is an organ that stores a fluid called bile that helps you digest your food. Gallstones form when cholesterol and other things in the bile become solid and stick together, making stones. The stones can be as small as a pebble or as big as a golf ball.

What are the symptoms?

Many people never know that they have gallstones. Sometimes, a gallstone can go from your gallbladder into your intestines. If it gets stuck along the way, you may have very bad pain in the right upper part of your stomach. The pain may be on and off, or may be constant. It sometimes can start after you eat. You may also have a fever or chills if the gallbladder is infected.

What increases the risk of getting them?

You're more likely to get gallstones if you are overweight, have diabetes, have high blood triglycerides (a type of fat), are fasting, or have lost a lot of weight quickly. Middle-aged people and women (especially if pregnant or taking

birth control pills) are also more likely to get gallstones. If anyone in your family has had gallstones, your risk is also increased.

How are they treated?

If you have gallstones but no pain, you may not need treatment. Once you have pain, you are very likely to have pain again. In this case, your doctor may suggest that you have surgery to remove your gallbladder. Sound wave therapy is an option for people who can't have or don't want surgery. This type of therapy breaks up the stones so they can move into the intestine without getting stuck. However, it cannot prevent new stones from forming. You can also take a pill to try to dissolve the stones. It works for some people, but not all. You and your doctor should talk about what treatment is right for you.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/gallstones.html>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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