

Common Gastrointestinal Problems

A Consumer Health Guide

Common GI Problems in Women: Gallstones

Did you know that women are at increased risk for gallstones?

Gallstones occur in up to 20% of American women by the age of 60. Women between the ages of 20 and 60 years are three times more likely to develop gallstones than men.

Risk Factors for Development of Gallstones

- * Multiple pregnancies
- * Family history of gallstones
- * Hispanic or American Indian heritage
- * Obesity
- * Rapid loss of weight

What is the gallbladder and what does it do?

The gallbladder is a pouch that sits beside the liver and stores bile. Bile is a green-yellow fluid produced by the liver. After eating, the gallbladder releases bile into the intestines where it helps with digestion. Although the gallbladder helps with natural food digestion, people can live a normal life without it.

What are gallstones?

Gallstones are solid clumps of cholesterol crystals and other substances that may be of variable size.

How are gallstones formed?

Bile is composed of fatty substances, like cholesterol. When excessive amounts of fat are present, crystals form. Over time, these crystals can combine and form stones. The initial formation of these stones does not cause pain or symptoms.

Are all gallstones the same?

No. There are different types of gallstones, depending on which fatty substances of the bile has solidified. Also, the stones can vary in size, ranging from a single grain of sand up to the size of a ping-pong ball.

About 90% of gallstones are composed of cholesterol. The remainder consist of pigmented material (bilirubin). The reason for the formation of pigment stones is not yet fully understood. However, some people with blood disorders such as Sickle Cell Anemia or Thalassemia are at increased risk for developing pigmented stones.

What symptoms are associated with gallstones?

Most persons with gallstones (80%) have no symptoms of pain. These people are said to have "silent" gallstones.

Patients with symptomatic gallstones usually experience pain in the right upper region of the abdomen, but sometimes pain may localize to the right shoulder or chest. When the pain of a "gallbladder attack" lasts longer than 1 to 2 hours, or is associated with fever, you should see your doctor immediately.

Other Complications of Gallstones

- * Yellow eyes and skin = jaundice
- * Gallbladder infection = cholecystitis
- * Bile duct infection = cholangitis
- * Infection in the blood = sepsis
- * Pancreas inflammation = pancreatitis

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