

ADVANTAGE

Gallstones



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What is a gallbladder?

The gallbladder is an organ that is attached to, and sits underneath the liver, in the right upper abdomen



What are the symptoms?



Pain in the right upper abdomen that extends to the right shoulder and back



Nausea and vomiting



Fever and jaundice

How is the diagnosis made?



Blood tests



Ultrasound

What is the treatment?



Removal of the gallbladder



Questions

for Dr Thapelo Motshudi

1 What is the gallbladder?

The gallbladder is an organ that is attached to, and sits underneath the liver, in the right upper abdomen. It looks like a pouch and fills up with bile to become pear-shaped when distended. Bile is produced in the liver and stored in the gallbladder, which has a volume of approximately 30 - 50 millilitres. The function of bile is to help with the breakdown of food in the small intestine, especially fatty foods. This means that before a meal the gallbladder may be big and full of bile, whereas after eating it is empty and flat, like a deflated balloon. This is the reason why you're advised not to eat before going for sonar of the abdomen to examine the gallbladder. Before opening in the small intestine, the duct or pipe carrying bile from the gallbladder merges with the duct from an organ called the pancreas.

2 What are gallstones?

Bile is made up of a number of substances, one of which is cholesterol. Sometimes the cholesterol in the bile hardens to form stones, which are then called gallstones. A person can have one or many stones which may vary in size. Overweight women over the age of 40 have a higher risk of getting gallstones.

3 What problems can arise from gallstones?

A lot of people have gallstones but are not even aware of it. However, if the stones block drainage of bile from the gallbladder or one of its ducts, then symptoms occur. The symptoms and complications depend on the site of obstruction and size of the stones. The obstruction stops the bile from draining, and if it occurs long enough then the gallbladder gets infected. This is a condition called cholecystitis. If the obstruction involves the pancreatic duct as well, the infection of the pancreas can follow, called pancreatitis.

4 What are the symptoms?

People with symptomatic gallstones have pain in the right upper abdomen that extends to the right shoulder and back. Often the pain is worse after eating fatty meals or at night, and it can be accompanied by nausea and vomiting. Once infection sets in then one can develop fever and jaundice, which is yellowing of the skin and eyes.

5 How is the diagnosis made?

The doctor will suspect gallstones based on the symptoms you provide and what is found during the physical examination. The doctor can then choose to perform some blood tests, but will almost certainly send you for an ultrasound (sonar) study. More often than not the stones and their complications will be seen when the sonar is performed. If it is still uncertain, you will be referred for further tests and investigations, depending on your doctor's preference and access to resources.

6 What is the treatment?

The treatment is removal of the gallbladder with surgery. In some instances the infection is first treated with antibiotics for a period of time, and then surgery performed afterwards. Occasionally if a patient is not suitable for surgery then a hole can be made in the skin and a tube/pipe placed within the gallbladder to drain the bile.