

Abdominal pain in adults

Abdominal pain is pain felt anywhere from below your ribs to your pelvis. It is also known as tummy pain or stomach pain. The abdomen houses many organs including your stomach, liver, pancreas, small and large bowel, and reproductive organs. There are also major blood vessels in the abdomen.

Serious causes of abdominal pain include appendicitis and pregnancy problems. However, most abdominal pain is harmless and goes away without surgery.

Most people only need relief from their symptoms. Sometimes abdominal pain can stop and the cause will never be known, or it may be that the cause becomes more obvious with time.

When you should see a doctor

Go straight to your doctor or the emergency department of the nearest hospital if you have any of the following:

- Severe pain
- Pain lasting for several hours
- Pain and/or vaginal bleeding if you are pregnant
- Pain in your scrotum if you are a male
- Pain *and* vomiting or shortness of breath
- Pain *and* vomiting blood
- Blood in your bowel motions or urine
- Pain that spreads to your chest, neck or shoulder
- Fever and sweats
- Become pale and clammy
- Unable to pass urine
- Unable to move your bowels or pass gas
- Any other concerns.

Symptoms of abdominal pain

The type of pain can vary greatly. When abdominal pain occurs, it can:

- Be sharp, dull, stabbing, cramp-like, twisting or fit many other descriptions
- Be brief, come and go in waves, or it can be constant
- Make you throw up (vomit)
- Make you want to stay still or make you so restless that you pace around trying to find 'just the right position'
- Vary from a minor problem to one needing urgent surgery.

Causes of abdominal pain

There are many reasons why you may have pain in your abdomen. People often worry about appendicitis, gallstones, ulcers, infections and pregnancy problems. Doctors also worry about these, as well as many other conditions. Abdominal pain may not come from the abdomen. Some surprising causes include heart attacks and pneumonias, conditions in the pelvis or groin, some skin rashes like shingles, and problems with stomach muscles like a strain. The pain may occur along with problems in passing urine or with bowel motions, or period problems.

The cause may be unclear

With so many organs and structures in the abdomen, it can be hard for a doctor to be absolutely sure about the cause of your problem. The doctor will ask you several questions and then examine you carefully. The doctor may perform no further tests. The cause of your pain may be quite clearly not serious. Another scenario may be that the doctor is unable to find a cause, but the pain gets better within hours or days. All the doctor can do is to be sure that the pain does not require surgery or admission to hospital.

Diagnosis of abdominal pain

If examinations and tests are needed, these may include:

- A rectal exam to check for hidden blood or other problems
- If you are a man, the doctor may check your penis and scrotum
- If you are a woman, the doctor may do a pelvic exam to check for problems in your womb (uterus), fallopian tubes and ovaries, and do a pregnancy test
- A blood test to look for infection (which causes a raised white cell count) or bleeding (which causes a low blood count or haemoglobin)
- Other blood tests may look at enzymes in the liver, pancreas and heart to sort out which organ may be involved
- A urine test to look for a urine infection or blood (if there is a kidney stone)
- An ECG (an electrical tracing of the heart) to rule out a heart attack
- Other tests, including x-ray, ultrasound or CT scan
- Sometimes you may be referred to another doctor to help find the cause of the problem.
- Endoscopy is an examination where a flexible tube with a light and video camera at the tip is used to examine some internal organs without the need for surgery. Different names are used depending on which organ is being looked at.

If you do have tests, the doctor will explain the results to you. Some results may take a number of days to come back and these will be sent to your local doctor.

Treatment for abdominal pain

Your treatment depends on what is causing your pain, but may include:

- **Pain relief** – your pain may not go away fully with painkillers, but it should ease.
- **Fluids** – you may have fluids given into a vein to correct fluid loss and rest your bowel.
- **Medicines** – for example, you may be given something to stop you vomiting.
- **Fasting** – your doctor may ask you not to eat or drink anything until the cause of your pain is known.

Taking care of yourself at home

Most abdominal pain goes away without special treatment. Be guided by your doctor, but there are some things you can do to help ease the pain, including:

- Place a hot water bottle or heated wheat bag on your abdomen.
- Soak in a warm bath. Take care not to scald yourself.
- Drink plenty of clear fluids such as water.
- Reduce your intake of coffee, tea and alcohol as these can make the pain worse.
- When you are allowed to eat again, start with clear liquids, then progress to bland foods such as crackers, rice, bananas or toast. Your doctor may advise you to avoid certain foods.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Try over-the-counter antacids, to help reduce some types of pain.
- Take mild painkillers such as paracetamol. Please check the packet for the right dose. Avoid aspirin or anti-inflammatory drugs unless advised to take them by a doctor. These drugs can make some types of abdominal pain worse.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)

- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- The emergency department of your nearest hospital
- The Gut Foundation Tel. (02) 9382 2749

Things to remember

- Abdominal pain is pain felt anywhere from below your ribs to your pelvis.
- Abdominal pain usually goes away without surgery and most people only need relief from their symptoms.
- If pain persists or if you have any other concerns, see your doctor.

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Better Health Channel

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