Abdominal pain in children

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Many children with abdominal pain get better in hours or days without special treatment and often no cause can be found. If pain or other problems persist, see your doctor.

Appendicitis is one of the more common reasons your child may need surgery.

Children often complain of stomach pain. It is one of the most common reasons parents take children to their doctor or the hospital emergency department. Stomach pain can be hard to diagnose. The doctor will ask you questions then examine your child. Sometimes a problem may be quite obvious, so no tests are needed.

Many children with stomach pain get better in hours or days without special treatment and often no cause can be found. Sometimes the cause becomes more obvious with time and treatment can be started. If pain or other problems persist, see your doctor.

Causes of abdominal pain in children

There are many health problems that can cause stomach pain for children, including:

- bowel (gut) problems – constipation, colic or irritable bowel
- infections – gastroenteritis, kidney or bladder infections, or infections in other parts of the body like the ear or chest
- food-related problems – too much food, food poisoning or food allergies
- problems outside the abdomen – muscle strain or migraine
- surgical problems – appendicitis, bowel obstruction or intussusception (telescoping of part of the gut)
- period pain – some girls can have pain before their periods start
- poisoning – such as spider bites, eating soap or smoking.

Repeat attacks of stomach pain

Some children suffer repeat attacks of stomach pain, which can be worrying for parents. Often, no health problem can be found.

Children may feel stomach pain when they are worried about themselves or people around them. Think about whether there is anything that is upsetting your child at home, school or kindergarten, or with friends. See your local doctor for advice. A referral may be needed to a paediatrician (a doctor who specialises in children).

Appendicitis explained

Appendicitis is one of the more common reasons your child may need surgery. The appendix is a small, dead-end tube leading from a part of the bowel. If this tube gets blocked, it can cause an infection. Appendicitis can happen at any age, but is rare in young children.

The pain often starts in the middle of the tummy and moves down low on the right side. The tummy becomes sore to touch. This is often worse with coughing and walking around. A child with appendicitis often shows signs of being unwell such as fever, refusing food, vomiting or (sometimes) diarrhoea.

If you are concerned your child may be developing appendicitis, visit your local doctor or go to the emergency department of your nearest hospital. An operation is often needed to remove the appendix, although in some cases the problem will settle without surgery.

Diagnosis of abdominal pain in children

When a problem is quite obvious, no tests are needed. If tests are needed, they may include:

- blood tests
- urine test
- stool (poo) sample
- x-rays
- other special tests
- review by a specialist doctor.

If your child does undergo tests, the doctor should explain the results to you. Some results may take a number of days to come back and these results will be sent to your local doctor.
Treatment for abdominal pain in children

Your child’s treatment will depend on what the doctor thinks is causing their pain. Treatment may be as simple as sending your child home with advice to rest, take fluids and eat a bland diet. Other treatment options include hospital admission and surgery.

Taking care of your child with abdominal pain

General suggestions on easing the pain include:

- Make sure your child gets plenty of rest.
- Help your child drink plenty of clear fluids such as cooled boiled water or juice.
- Do not push your child to eat if they feel unwell.
- If your child is hungry, offer bland food such as crackers, rice, bananas or toast.
- Place a hot water bottle or wheat bag on your child’s tummy or run a warm bath for them. Take care not to scald yourself or your child.
- Give paracetamol if your child is in pain or is miserable. Remember that doses for children are often different to those for adults, so check the packet carefully for the right dose. Avoid giving aspirin.

When to seek urgent medical help for abdominal pain in children

Go to your local doctor or the emergency department of your nearest hospital straight away if your child has:

- severe or worsening pain or pain that has moved position
- fever or chills
- become pale, sweaty and unwell
- been vomiting for more than 24 hours
- refused to eat or drink
- blood in their vomit or poo
- problems passing urine or is producing less than four wet nappies a day
- skin rash with pain
- any other problem that concerns you.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- The emergency department of your nearest hospital
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Healthdirect Tel: 1800 022 222 - 24 hours health advice line
- Paediatrician
- The Gut Foundation Tel. (02) 9382 2749

Things to remember

- Many children with abdominal pain get better in hours or days without special treatment and often no cause can be found.
- If pain or other problems persist, see your doctor.
- Appendicitis is one of the more common reasons your child may need surgery.

References

- Abdominal pain (stomach ache), The Children’s Hospital at Westmead, Australia. More information here.

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Digestive system

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab.

- Digestive system explained
- Oesophagus
- Stomach
- Small intestine
- Large intestine
- Rectum
- Liver and gallbladder

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Pancreas

Digestive system explained

- **Barium tests**
  Barium tests are used to examine conditions of the digestive tract such as reflux, narrowing or ulceration.

- **Digestive system explained**
  The digestive tract can be thought of as a long muscular tube with digestive organs attached along the way.

- **Fibre in food**
  A diet high in fibre keeps the digestive system healthy.

Oesophagus

- **Barrett’s oesophagus**
  Symptoms of Barrett’s oesophagus are similar to regular heartburn, which means many people don’t seek treatment until their condition is quite advanced.

- **Digestive tract birth defects**
  Too much amniotic fluid surrounding the baby during pregnancy (polyhydramnios) may indicate the presence of defects of the digestive tract.

- **Hiccups**
  Hiccups that last for days, weeks or even years may be symptomatic of underlying disease.

- **Indigestion**
  Food inside the stomach is only kept there by the force of gravity so to avoid heartburn, don’t lie down after a big meal.

- **Throat cancer**
  Risk factors for throat cancer include smoking and heavy alcohol consumption.

Stomach

- **Gastritis**
  Gastritis may be caused by many factors including infection, alcohol, particular medications and some allergic and immune conditions.

- **Hernias**
  Both reducible and non-reducible hernias need to be surgically repaired - this is a common operation.

- **Peritonitis**
  Peritonitis is a life-threatening emergency that needs prompt medical treatment.

- **Stomach cancer**
  The symptoms of stomach cancer are usually vague and can be common to other medical conditions.

- **Stomach ulcer**
  Most stomach ulcers are caused by infection or medication, not stress or poor diet.

Small intestine

- **Coeliac disease and gluten sensitivity**
  Coeliac disease is an immune disease caused by gluten.

- **Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis**
  When people with inflammatory bowel disease are not experiencing a flare-up of their illness, they feel quite well and are often free of symptoms.

- **Gastroenteritis**
  It is important to establish the cause of gastro, as different types of gastroenteritis respond to different treatments.

- **Gastroenteritis - amoebiasis**
  Amoebiasis can cause diarrhoea among travellers to developing countries.

- **Gastroenteritis - campylobacteriosis**
  Campylobacteriosis is a type of gastroenteritis and is more common in children under five years of age and young adults.
• **Gastroenteritis - cryptosporidiosis**
  Outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis have been associated with child care centres, public swimming pools and contaminated water supplies.

• **Gastroenteritis - giardiasis**
  Most people infected with Giardia parasites do not develop symptoms but can still spread the infection to others.

• **Gastroenteritis in children**
  Gastroenteritis or Gastro can be dangerous for very young babies. Gastro is common in young children and spreads easily. Gastro is a bowel infection which causes diarrhoea (runny or watery poo) and...

• **Gastroenteritis - salmonellosis**
  You may be more prone to salmonellosis if you are elderly, have another medical condition (such as a weakened immune system) or are malnourished.

• **Gastroenteritis - shigella**
  Outbreaks of shigella gastroenteritis can occur in institutional settings, particularly where children are still in nappies or adults are incontinent.

• **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)**
  Irritable bowel syndrome can't be cured with medications or special diets but avoiding individual triggers can help prevent it.

• **Pets – safe handling of reptiles and tropical fish**
  People in contact with tropical fish and reptiles such as turtles, lizards and snakes may be at risk of infections and illness due to germs (such as bacteria, viruses and parasites) carried on the...

• **Rotavirus**
  Rotavirus is a common cause of viral gastroenteritis for Australian babies and preschool children.

• **Traveller's diarrhoea**
  The risk of traveller's diarrhoea is higher where sanitation and hygiene standards are poor.

**Large intestine**

• **Appendicitis**
  Anyone of any age can be struck by appendicitis, but it seems to be more common during childhood and adolescence.

• **Botulism**
  Botulism is considered a medical emergency. If untreated, it may cause death.

• **Bowel cancer**
  Bowel cancer is highly curable if found at an early stage.

• **Bowel motions**
  Many illnesses and events can affect the colour and texture of faeces.

• **Collagenous colitis and lymphocytic colitis**
  Collagenous colitis and lymphocytic colitis are types of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

• **Constipation**
  Most cases of constipation are treated by eating a diet high in fibre, drinking more fluids, and exercising daily.

• **Constipation and children**
  A healthy diet, plenty of fluids, exercise and regular toilet habits can help relieve constipation in children.

• **Diarrhoea**
  Acute diarrhoea in babies and young children can be life threatening.

• **Diverticulosis and diverticulitis**
  Diverticulosis and diverticulitis relate to the formation or infection of abnormal pouches in the bowel wall.

• **Flatulence**
  Foods that tend to trigger flatulence also contain essential nutrients and shouldn't be eliminated.

• **Incontinence and continence problems**

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Many things can be done to manage, treat and sometimes cure incontinence and continence problems...

- **Incontinence - prevention tips**
  Incontinence can be prevented in most cases...

- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)**
  Irritable bowel syndrome can't be cured with medications or special diets but avoiding individual triggers can help prevent it...

- **Pinworms**
  Despite the unsavoury reputation, a pinworm infection (worms) is relatively harmless and easily treated...

- **Polyps**
  Nasal polyps can sometimes interfere with breathing...

- **Short bowel syndrome**
  A person with short bowel syndrome is likely to be deficient in a range of important nutrients...

- **Slow transit constipation**
  A newborn with slow transit constipation may not pass meconium until 24 hours or more after being born...

- **Stoma after ileostomy or colostomy**
  A stoma is an artificially created hole (stoma) in the abdomen so that faeces can still leave the body...

- **Tapeworms and hydatid disease**
  It's important for your own health to control tapeworm infection in your dog...

**Rectum**

- **Anal fissure**
  Around half of cases of anal fissures heal by themselves with proper self-care and avoidance of constipation...

- **Haemorrhoids**
  A diet high in fibre can both treat and prevent haemorrhoids...

- **Rectal cancer**
  If treated in its earliest stages, rectal cancer is highly curable...

- **Rectal prolapse**
  Rectal prolapse occurs when the rectum turns itself inside out and comes out through the anus...

- **Rectocele**
  A rectocele is when the rectum protrudes into the vagina...

**Liver and gallbladder**

- **Cirrhosis of the liver**
  Cirrhosis is a type of liver damage where healthy cells are replaced by scar tissue...

- **Gallbladder - gallstones and surgery**
  Medical treatment for gallstones may not be necessary unless the gallstones cause symptoms...

- **Gilbert's syndrome**
  Gilbert's syndrome and hepatitis both cause jaundice but are not related...

- **Hepatitis**
  Hepatitis is an umbrella term for several diseases that affect the liver...

- **Hepatitis A**
  Immunisation is the best protection against hepatitis A infection and it is recommended for people in high-risk groups...

- **Hepatitis B**
  Hepatitis B is a viral infection that affects the liver and can lead to serious illness or death...
Hepatitis B – immunisation
Immunisation against hepatitis B reduces the risk of infection in babies.

Hepatitis C
In Australia, hepatitis C is most often spread through the sharing of unsterile drug injecting equipment. New all oral combination treatment has greatly improved health outcomes for people with.

Hepatitis C Cure - what it means for Victorians (video)
Hepatitis C Cure - what it means for Victorians.

Jaundice in babies
If your baby is full-term and healthy, mild jaundice is nothing to worry about and will resolve by itself within a week or so.

Liver
Some forms of liver disease are inherited, while others are caused by lifestyle factors.

Liver cancer
Liver cancer can be a primary cancer that starts in the liver, or a secondary cancer that starts in another part of the body and spreads to the liver.

New drugs for the treatment of hepatitis C – Frequently Asked Questions for patients
In Australia, hepatitis C is most often spread through the sharing of unsterile drug injecting equipment. New all oral combination treatment has greatly improved health outcomes for people with.

Primary biliary cirrhosis
Primary biliary cirrhosis is an autoimmune condition characterised by inflammation and scarring of the bile ducts within the liver.

Pancreas

Diabetes
Diabetes and the build-up of glucose (sugar) in the blood can cause serious complications if left untreated.

Diabetes type 1
Type 1 diabetes can affect anyone of any age, but is more common in people under 30 years.

Diabetes type 2
Type 2 diabetes may be prevented, but it cannot be cured.

Pancreas
The pancreas helps to digest food, particularly protein.

Pancreatic cancer
The causes of pancreatic cancer are unknown, but smokers are at greater risk.

Pancreatitis
Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas, which can be either acute or chronic.

Related Information

Abdominal pain in adults
The type of pain felt in the abdomen can vary greatly.

Stomach ulcer
Most stomach ulcers are caused by infection or medication, not stress or poor diet.

Gastritis
Gastritis may be caused by many factors including infection, alcohol, particular medications and some allergic and immune conditions.

Coughing and wheezing in children
Coughing and wheezing in babies can be distressing for you and your baby, but in most cases symptoms can be relieved at home.

Hernias
Both reducible and non-reducible hernias need to be surgically repaired - this is a common operation.
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The Children's Hospital at Westmead

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