Appendicitis
Appendicitis means inflammation of the appendix, which is a small tube attached to the large intestine. Treatment may include intravenous antibiotics or surgical removal of the appendix.

The appendix is a thin tail, tube or appendage growing out of the caecum, which is part of the large intestine located on the lower right side of the abdomen. The precise function of the appendix in the human body is something of a mystery, although it clearly plays a role in digestion for other animal species.

Appendicitis means inflammation of the appendix. Food or faecal matter can sometimes lodge in the narrow tube of the appendix, and the blockage becomes infected with bacteria. This is a medical emergency. If the appendix bursts, its infected contents will spread throughout the abdominal cavity. Infection of the lining of the abdominal cavity (peritonitis) can be life threatening without prompt treatment.

Anyone of any age can be struck by appendicitis, but it seems to be more common during childhood and adolescence. It is less common for anyone over the age of 30 years to develop appendicitis. Treatment options include surgery.

Symptoms of appendicitis

Symptoms of appendicitis include:
- dull pain centred around the navel, which progresses to a sharp pain in the lower right side of the abdomen
- pain in the lower back, hamstring or rectum (less commonly)
- fever
- vomiting
- diarrhoea or constipation
- loss of appetite.

Causes of appendicitis

The cause of acute appendicitis is still unclear. A number of studies have indicated that obstruction of the appendix usually occurs during appendicitis, while others dispute that obstruction is the cause of appendicitis. Often, a small amount of faecal matter (poo) is present in the appendix at the time of the appendicectomy. There is no direct evidence that diet plays a role in causing appendicitis.

Many people treated for acute appendicitis may have had previous episodes of appendicitis that they did not seek treatment for.

Perforated appendix

If pus builds up in the appendix, it will eventually burst, flooding the abdominal cavity with infected matter. Bursting, or perforation, can occur 36 hours or so from the onset of infection. The signs of a perforated appendix include a severe worsening of symptoms and collapse.

Infection of the lining of the abdominal cavity (peritonitis) is a life-threatening complication and requires immediate emergency treatment.

Diagnosis of appendicitis

Appendicitis can mimic the symptoms of other disorders such as gastroenteritis, ectopic pregnancy and various infections (including those of the kidney and chest).

Diagnosis may include a thorough physical examination and careful consideration of the symptoms. If the diagnosis is not clear, then laboratory tests and ultrasound or CT scans may be needed.

Since appendicitis is potentially life threatening if left untreated, doctors will err on the side of caution and operate, even if there is no firm diagnosis.

Treatment for appendicitis
Treatment includes an operation to remove the appendix completely. This procedure is known as an appendicectomy or appendectomy. The appendix can often be removed using laparoscopic (keyhole) surgery. The surgeon will use a slender instrument (laparoscope), which is inserted through tiny incisions (cuts) in the abdomen. This eliminates the need for an abdominal incision.

If this is not possible, a small incision is made in the lower abdomen. The appendix is cut away and the wound on the large intestine stitched. If the appendix has burst, the surgeon will insert a tube and drain the abdominal cavity of pus. Antibiotics are given to the patient intravenously to reduce the possibility of peritonitis.

The typical hospital stay for an appendicectomy is between three and five days. Removing the appendix appears to have no effect on the workings of the digestive system, in either the short or long term.

An alternative to surgery is antibiotic therapy. Studies that have compared the outcome of surgery to the outcome of antibiotics show that about 70 per cent of cases may resolve with antibiotic therapy and not require surgery. However, the factors leading to failure of antibiotic therapy are not known, so antibiotic therapy alone is usually reserved for patients too frail to undergo surgery.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- If you suspect appendicitis, call 000 for an ambulance or go to your nearest hospital emergency department immediately.

Things to remember

- Appendicitis means inflammation of the appendix, which is a small tube attached to the large intestine.
- Appendicitis is a medical emergency.
- Treatment may include intravenous antibiotics or surgical removal of the appendix.

References

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.

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

**Stomach**

- **Abdominal pain in children**
  Children may feel stomach pain for a range of reasons and may need treatment.

- **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 in 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 - shigellosis**
  Outbreaks of shigellosis 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**
  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**

**betterhealth.vic.gov.au**
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 Care - what it means for Victorians (video)
  Hepatitis C Care - 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.

- Liver - fatty liver disease

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
The damage caused by fatty liver disease can often be halted or reversed through simple lifestyle changes...

• **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**

• **Bowel motions**

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**Related information on other websites**

• The Children's Hospital at Westmead - Parents - Appendicitis

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Page last reviewed: 31 Aug 2014

