Peritonitis is the inflammation of abdominal membranes, most commonly due to bacterial infection. Peritonitis is life threatening if not treated promptly.

Treatment options include hospitalisation, antibiotics and surgery.

Peritonitis is inflammation of the membranes of the abdominal wall and organs. Peritonitis is a life-threatening emergency that needs prompt medical treatment.

The abdominal organs, such as the stomach and liver, are wrapped in a thin, tough membrane called the visceral peritoneum. The abdominal walls are similarly lined (parietal peritoneum). A protective layer of fat contained in a membrane (the omentum) sits between the organs and the abdominal wall. Lubricating fluid allows all these membranes to slide smoothly over each other.

The main function of the peritoneum is to permit free movement of the internal organs during digestion. Peritonitis is inflammation of the peritoneum caused by bacterial infection.

**Summary**

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- Peritonitis is life threatening if not treated promptly.
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**Symptoms of peritonitis**

The symptoms of peritonitis include:

- Severe and constant abdominal pain
- Fever
- Inability to break wind or pass stools
- Nausea and vomiting
- Shock.

**Spontaneous peritonitis and secondary peritonitis**

Peritonitis may be classed as spontaneous peritonitis or secondary peritonitis. The symptoms of spontaneous peritonitis are often less dramatic than secondary peritonitis. Spontaneous peritonitis can occur in patients with severe liver disease, heart disease or kidney disease. Often these diseases cause the accumulation of fluid within the abdominal cavity. This is called ascites. The presence of ascites, together with the person’s weakened defences against infection, often leads to bacterial infection.

**Causes of secondary peritonitis**

The main cause of secondary peritonitis is the escape of pus from an infected abdominal organ, including:

- **Perforated ulcer** – a severe, untreated ulcer can sometimes burn through the wall of the stomach or duodenum, allowing digestive juices and food to leak into the abdominal cavity.
- **Perforated bowel** – the intestines can be damaged and perforated by a range of conditions, including diverticulitis and inflammatory diseases such as Crohn’s disease.
- **Burst appendix** – the appendix is a thin tail growing out of the large intestine. Food or faecal matter can sometimes lodge inside the appendix and become infected with bacteria.
- **Perforated gall bladder** – this small sac stores bile from the liver. A severe infection (cholecystitis) can cause the gall bladder to burst.
- **Pancreatitis** – an inflamed pancreas can directly cause inflammation in the abdomen, which may be very severe. The two major causes of pancreatitis are alcoholism and gallstones.
- **Ectopic pregnancy** – the fertilised egg lodges and grows inside the slim fallopian tube instead of the uterus. The tube ruptures in around one out of five cases.
- **Salpingitis** – inflammation of the fallopian tube. Sometimes, the tube becomes distended with pus until it bursts.
- **Abdominal surgery** – infection is a risk of any type of major surgery.
- **Necrotising enterocolitis** – a condition that affects newborn babies and sometimes prompts peritonitis.
- **Blood infection** – can be caused by a range of conditions, including cirrhosis of the liver, some forms of kidney disease and appendicitis.
- **Dialysis** – bacteria on peritoneal dialysis equipment can enter the abdominal cavity.
- **Stab wound** – bacteria from a knife or other sharp object enter the abdominal cavity.

**The infection can be fatal**

Peritonitis is life threatening without prompt medical treatment. The infection stops the normal movements of the intestines (peristalsis). The body quickly becomes dehydrated, and important chemicals called electrolytes are dangerously disturbed. The internal organs – such as lungs, kidneys and liver – may fail. A person with untreated peritonitis can die within a few days.

**Diagnosis of peritonitis**

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Diagnosing peritonitis involves a number of tests, including:

- **Physical examination** – the abdomen is hard and painful. There are no bowel movements or sounds.
- **Signs of shock** – including low blood pressure, abnormal pulse rate and pale skin.
- **Blood tests** – to check for which bacteria are responsible.
- **X-rays** – of the abdomen.
- **Laparoscopy** – a slender tube is inserted through an abdominal incision and the insides examined.
- **Peritoneal fluid culture** – a sample of fluid is taken and examined for signs of infection.

**Treatment for peritonitis**

Treatment options for peritonitis depend on the cause, but may include:

- **Hospitalisation** – often in an intensive care unit
- **Antibiotics** – tailored to the specific bacteria to kill the infection
- **Intravenous fluids** – to rehydrate the body and replace lost electrolytes
- **Surgery** – to repair the ruptured organ and wash out the abdominal cavity of blood and pus
- **Treatment for the underlying cause** – such as a perforated ulcer.

**Adhesions often follow peritonitis**

Adhesions are bands of scar tissue that result from previous inflammation (such as peritonitis) or surgery. They can occasionally cause strangulation and obstruction to the bowel (bowel obstruction). In some cases, surgery may be required to cut the adhesions.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Hospital emergency department
- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)

**References**

- *Appendicitis*, Better Health Channel, Department of Health and Human Services, State Government of Victoria, Australia.
- *Pancreatitis*, Better Health Channel, Department of Health and Human Services, State Government of Victoria, Australia.

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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
- 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**

- **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 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**

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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**
  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)

- 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
  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

• Adhesions
  Adhesions may have no signs or symptoms, or they may cause pain by pulling on nerves.

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

• 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.

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

Home

Related information on other websites

• MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia: Peritonitis.

Content Partner
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