

# Abdominal pain

## WHAT IS ABDOMINAL PAIN?

Abdominal pain (stomach pain) occurs between the bottom of your ribs and the pelvis. This area, the abdomen, contains many organs including your stomach, liver, pancreas, kidneys, small and large bowel and reproductive organs. Abdominal pain can range from a small problem to one needing urgent surgery.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

The pain can vary greatly. When abdominal pain occurs it can:

- be sharp, dull, stabbing, cramp-like, twisting, boring (or many other descriptions)
- last for a very short period of time, come and go in waves, or be constant
- make you throw up (vomit)
- make you want to stay still, or even make you so restless that you pace around trying to find 'just the right position'.

## WHAT CAUSES ABDOMINAL PAIN?

There are many causes of abdominal pain. These include:

- menstrual (period) pain or pregnancy-related problems
- bowel problems including constipation (difficulty passing stools), gas (wind) or diarrhoea
- peptic (stomach) ulcers or gastric irritation such as indigestion and heartburn
- medical conditions such as Crohn's disease and irritable bowel syndrome
- infections such as gastroenteritis (vomiting or diarrhoea), food poisoning or sexually transmitted infections
- urinary tract infections

- kidney stones
- appendicitis
- gallstones and liver problems.

Surprisingly, abdominal pain may not come from the abdomen. Some causes include heart attacks, pneumonia, conditions in the pelvis or groin and some skin rashes such as shingles.

You may have pain and other problems with passing urine, bowel motions, menstruation or even flatulence.

## TREATMENT

Sometimes it is difficult to find out what is causing the pain. Some conditions take some time to develop before the cause becomes clear. Your doctor will make sure you don't need surgery or admission to hospital.

The pain may ease on its own within hours or days, so you might not need any treatment.

If examinations and tests are needed these **may** include:

- a blood test to look for infection or bleeding (other blood tests may look at enzymes in the liver, pancreas and heart to see if any of those organs are involved)
- a urine test to look for an infection or blood in the urine
- an ECG (an electrical tracing of the heart) to rule out a heart attack
- an x-ray, ultrasound or CT scan
- a rectal (anal) examination to check for hidden blood or other problems
- if you are a man, a check of your penis and scrotum

- if you are a woman, a pelvic or vaginal examination to check for problems in your womb (uterus), ovarian tubes and ovaries
- a pregnancy test for women of child-bearing age.

You may be asked about your sexual activity or drug and alcohol use. It is important to be honest and truthful with your answers because they may ensure the correct treatment of your pain.

If you do have tests, the doctor will explain the results to you. Some results may take a number of days to come back. Make an appointment with your local doctor to ensure these are followed up.

You may be referred to a specialist doctor to help find the cause of your problem.

Your treatment will depend on what is causing your pain. You may receive the following:

- pain medications – either by mouth (orally) or through the vein (intravenous); your pain may not go away fully but it should ease
- fluids – you may have fluids given into a vein to correct fluid loss and to rest your stomach and bowel
- anti-nausea medication – you may be given medication to stop you vomiting
- fasting – you should not eat or drink anything until you are given permission by a doctor or nurse, or you are discharged home.

## HOME CARE

About two in five patients with abdominal pain who come to an emergency department never receive a diagnosis and the pain settles and goes away. Be guided by your doctor or healthcare professional, but there are some things you can do to help ease the pain.

- Place a hot water bottle or wheat bag on your abdomen. Do not apply it directly to the skin (wrap it in a pillow or tea towel to avoid burns).

- Soak in a warm bath. Take care not to scald yourself.
- Drink plenty of clear fluids such as water, diluted juice or cordial. Reduce or cut out your intake of coffee, tea and alcohol – these can make the pain worse.
- When you're allowed to eat again start with clear liquids (such as soup), then progress to bland foods such as crackers, rice, bananas or toast. Your doctor may suggest you avoid certain foods.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Try over-the-counter antacids such as Mylanta, Gastrogel or Quik-Eze to help reduce some types of pain such as indigestion or heartburn. See your local doctor if the pain does not ease.
- Take mild painkillers such as paracetamol.
- In some conditions, anti-inflammatory medication such as ibuprofen (such as Nurofen) can help with pain and prevent complications. Your doctor will advise if this is the case.
- Anti-spasm and anti-diarrhoeal agents may also help. Ask your doctor or healthcare professional what is best for you.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

Your pain may go away without significant treatment. Sometimes abdominal pain can stop and the cause will never be known. Some patients require admission to hospital for treatment and some of these need an operation (surgery). In some cases, the cause only becomes more obvious with time. If symptoms worsen or persist or new symptoms develop (such as fever or vomiting) see your doctor, return to the emergency department or urgent care centre for further assessment.

## Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

If pain persists for more than 24 hours or if you have any other concerns see your local doctor or healthcare professional. If this is not possible return to the emergency department or urgent care centre.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.\*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

\* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 03 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email [emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au](mailto:emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au)

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