

Gallbladder Surgery

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a gallbladder for?

Think of the gallbladder as a liquid soap dispenser that helps the digestive tract absorb fatty foods. Bile is like the soap, formed in the liver and stored in the gallbladder for use when a fatty meal is eaten. With normal function, the gallbladder does this painlessly and automatically.

What are gallstones?

All liquid soap dispensers form soap scum with dehydration. Essentially, gallstones are dehydrated soap scum largely composed of cholesterol. They are originally soft and mushy, like Play-Doh, but harden with time.

How does the gallbladder cause pain?

Gallbladder pain usually indicates an obstruction of the outflow of the exit of the gallbladder, commonly caused by gallstones or a kink or twist and its subsequent inflammation of the exiting bile tube. Pain is a warning of more pain to come and potentially serious complications.

Can gallbladder problems be serious?

Yes! Gallbladder removal is one of the more common emergency operations performed in America. Gallstones commonly obstruct the outflow of the gallbladder, resulting in severe pressure that can cause gangrene in the gallbladder. In addition, infections can occur when the bile is thick with sludge. This is more common in people who have depressed immune function, such as diabetics. Gallstones can also migrate, causing obstruction of the bile tubes from the liver or from the pancreas gland. Severe pancreatitis can result in months of hospitalization and severe diabetes mellitus.

What are typical symptoms of gallbladder trouble?

Typically, pain is experienced below the right ribcage in the upper abdomen, radiating through the right shoulder and back, and can be severe to moderate. Often, pain occurs after eating meals, though many patients are awakened in the middle of the night with this pain, preventing sleep for hours. Other common symptoms include burping, fatty food intolerance, a full feeling, increased heartburn, and bowel irregularity. If a patient with gallstones suddenly turns yellow, even in the absence of pain, this is a severe sign of bile tube obstruction to the liver.



Gallbladder Surgery

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (cont.)

Gallbladder management without surgery.

A low-fat diet may result in less frequent and less intense symptoms. For those who have attacks at night, sleeping on the right side may make those attacks less frequent. Pills are available to dissolve gallstones, although the pills are generally toxic to the liver and may take six months to two years to dissolve the stones. Lithotripsy has been tried to crush gallstones; however, that form of therapy was largely abandoned by the late 1980's.

Laparoscopic gallbladder surgery.

The standard form of treatment for symptomatic gallbladder trouble is laparoscopic cholecystectomy. This is usually an outpatient surgery under general anesthesia, where a small TV camera is introduced into the abdomen through an incision near the navel. Three other small incisions allow the surgeon to work in the abdominal cavity without opening the abdomen all the way. The operation usually takes around an hour, and during the operation, x-rays are usually taken of the bile tubes to make sure that there are no migrating gallstones left behind.

What is recovery like?

This is usually an outpatient surgery and nausea and discomfort are most bothersome in the first 24-48 hours. After that, a low-fat diet is advised for a few months to minimize indigestion relating to adjustment to digestion without the gallbladder. Most people are off pain medicine and driving within a week, and have returned back to light duty work within a week. For those doing heavy work, lifting over 15 pounds is not advised for about a month.



Meridian Surgery Center
Puyallup, WA 98371
(P) 253.840.1999 (F) 253.445.4125
www.robertwrightmd.com