

Abdominal pain

Emergency Department factsheets

What is abdominal pain?

Abdominal pain (stomach pain) occurs between the bottom of your ribs and pelvis. This area, the abdomen, contains many organs including your stomach, liver, pancreas, small and large bowel and reproductive organs. Abdominal pain can range from a minor problem to one needing urgent surgery. Many medical conditions can cause abdominal pain. Often, the cause cannot be found.

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)
- brief, 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'.

The pain may occur along with problems passing urine, bowel motions, period problems or even flatulence.

What causes abdominal pain?

There are many causes of abdominal pain. These include:

- infections such as gastroenteritis, food poisoning or sexually transmitted and pelvic infections
- appendicitis
- gallstones and liver problems
- peptic (stomach) ulcers or gastric irritation such as indigestion and heartburn

- bowel problems including constipation, gas (wind) or diarrhoea
- medical conditions such as Crohn's disease and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- menstrual (period) pain or pregnancy related 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.

With so many organs and structures in the abdomen, it is sometimes difficult to find the cause of the pain.

Some conditions take some time to develop before the cause becomes obvious. The doctor will make sure you do not require surgery or admission to hospital. The pain may ease on its own within hours or days, without 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 a urine infection or blood
- an ECG (an electrical tracing of the heart) to rule out a heart attack
- an x-ray, ultrasound or CT scan
- a rectal 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 may be required.

You may be asked about your sexual activity, or drug and alcohol use. It is important to be honest and truthful with your answers as 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 and your local doctor needs to follow these up. Make an appointment with your local doctor.

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

Treatment

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

- pain relief either by mouth (orally) or through the vein (intravenous); your pain may not go away fully with pain-killers but it should ease.
- fluids: you may have fluids given into the vein to correct fluid loss and to rest your stomach and bowel
- 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

Most abdominal pain goes away without special treatment. Be guided by your doctor or health-care professional, but there are some things you can do to help ease the pain.

- Place a hot water bottle or wheat bag on the abdomen. Do not apply directly to the skin (wrap 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 as these can make the pain worse.

- When 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 advise you to avoid certain foods.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Try over-the-counter antacids, such as Mylanta, Gastrogel and 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. Check the packet for the right dose. Avoid aspirin or anti-inflammatory medications unless otherwise directed. These medications can make some types of abdominal pain worse.

What to expect

Most pain goes away without surgery and most people need only relief from their symptoms. Sometimes abdominal pain can stop and the cause will never be known. Or it may be that the cause becomes more obvious with time.

Return immediately if

- Your pain gets worse or you start to feel it only in one area.
- You vomit blood or find blood in your stool.
- You are dizzy or faint.
- Your abdomen becomes swollen.
- You have frequent vomiting.
- You have a temperature over 39C.
- You have trouble passing urine.
- You feel short of breath.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000). See your local doctor or health-care professional if you have:

- stomach pain that is getting worse
- frequent vomiting or diarrhoea or both
- blood or mucus in your faeces

- passed little or no urine, or your urine is dark or smelly.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate.
Please check with your telephone service provider

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