

Patient education: Gallstones (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is the gallbladder? — The gallbladder is a small, pear-shaped organ that is tucked under your liver ([figure 1](#)). It stores bile, a fluid that helps the body break down fat.

What are gallstones? — Gallstones are small stones that form inside the gallbladder. They can be tiny specks or get as big as the whole gallbladder, which can be up to 6 inches long.

Normally, the gallbladder fills with bile in between meals. Then, when you eat fatty foods, the gallbladder empties the bile into the intestine. Sometimes, though, gallstones clog the gallbladder and keep it from draining. Other times, gallstones just irritate the gallbladder. If the gallstones are pushed out of the gallbladder, they can keep the liver or pancreas from draining.

What are the symptoms of gallstones? — In most cases, gallstones do not cause any symptoms. When they do cause symptoms, gallstones can cause:

- Belly pain – Often on the right side just under the rib cage or in the middle top portion of the belly
- Pain in the back or right shoulder
- Nausea and vomiting

If you know that you have gallstones but have no symptoms, you probably will not need treatment. But if you start having symptoms, you should get treated. The symptoms can come and go, but they often get worse over time.

Are gallstones serious? — Not usually. In rare cases they can lead to serious problems, including:

- Jaundice, a condition that turns your skin and eyes yellow
- Infection
- Tears in the gallbladder, which can lead to death
- Inflammation of the pancreas (the pancreas is an organ that makes hormones and juices involved in food breakdown)

Is there a test for gallstones? — Yes, doctors can find out if you have gallstones by doing an imaging test, such as an ultrasound. An ultrasound is a painless test that uses sound waves to create a picture of your gallbladder.

Even if tests show that you have gallstones, that does not mean they are causing symptoms. Your doctor might need to do other tests to make sure your stones and your symptoms are related.

How are gallstones treated? — People with gallstones generally have 3 treatment options. They can have:

- **No treatment** – This option is best for people with no symptoms. If they start having symptoms, they can think about treatment then.
- **Surgery to remove the gallbladder and the stones** – Gallbladder surgery is routine in the United States. But it involves using anesthesia, so it has some risks. The surgery does not affect digestion very much. But about half the people who have surgery have mild symptoms afterward, including watery bowel movements,

gas, or bloating. These symptoms usually get better. People who have their gallbladder removed do not need to worry about gallstones coming back.

- **Treatment to get rid of the stones but keep the gallbladder** – People who choose this approach can take medicines to break up gallstones or be treated with a device that breaks up stones (or both). These treatments can work, but they take time – months to years. People with severe symptoms might not want to wait that long to feel better. Plus, the stones can come back after these treatments.

How do I know which treatment to have? — The right treatment for you will depend on:

- How large your stones are
- Whether you have symptoms, and how bad the symptoms are
- How you feel about the treatment options

Ask your doctor or nurse how each treatment might affect you. Then work with him or her to find the treatment that makes the most sense for you.

Can I do anything to keep from getting (more) gallstones? — Yes. You can try to keep yourself at a healthy weight. People who are overweight are more likely to get gallstones.

If you plan to lose weight quickly – even if you have never had gallstones – ask your doctor or nurse what you can do to keep from getting gallstones. Losing weight quickly – for example, through weight loss surgery – can lead to gallstones. But your doctor or nurse can give you medicines to keep that from happening.

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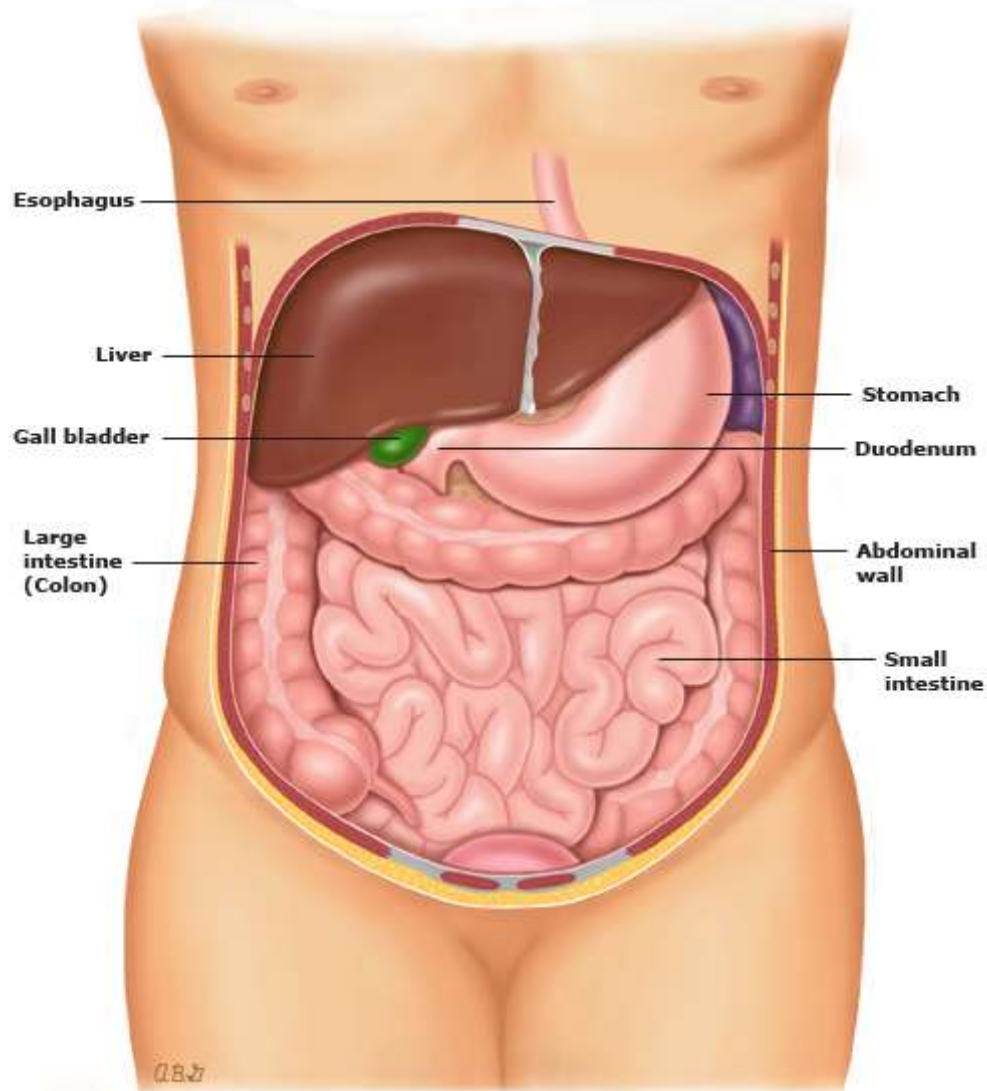
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GRAPHICS

Organs inside the abdomen (belly)



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