

# Abdominal pain

## 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.

## 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)
- be 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'.

## 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*.

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

## Treatment

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.

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 painkillers 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 to eat or drink anything until you are given permission by a doctor or nurse, or you are discharged home.



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## 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.

## Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



If pain persists for more than 24 hours or if you have any other concerns see your local doctor or health care professional.



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. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

\*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



## Want to know more?

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

## Notes:

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 8064 or email [edfactsheets@dhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:edfactsheets@dhs.vic.gov.au)

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