



## QUESTION #5

### Could this pain be gallstones?

Gallstones are small, pebble-like substances that develop in the gallbladder, explains DR ANDREA RAJNAKOVA. They can be as small as a grain of sand or as large as a golf ball, and they form over time when components of bile crystallise. In the gallbladder there may be just one large stone, hundreds of tiny stones, or a combination of the two.

#### What are the symptoms?

Small gallstones can block the bile ducts, causing severe pain, fever and jaundice. Pain can be felt in the upper abdomen, in the back between the shoulder blades, or under the right shoulder. Biliary colic, as this pain is called, typically occurs at night after heavy, oily or rich food.

#### How are gallstones diagnosed?

They're often discovered during tests for other health conditions, but don't necessarily require treatment. But when gallstones are suspected to be the cause of symptoms, an ultrasound scan is the most sensitive and specific test.

#### Who tends to get them?

Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from gallstones, especially those who are pregnant, use HRT or take birth control pills. Other risk factors include:

- being over 40
- being overweight or obese
- losing a lot of weight quickly
- a family history of gallstones
- being diabetic.

#### What are the possible treatment modalities?

Gallstones trapped in the bile ducts may be located and removed by endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP), before surgery. Cholecystectomy is the surgical removal of the gallbladder together with its stones. In the absence of complications, it can be done as keyhole surgery, called laparoscopic cholecystectomy, performed via three or four small puncture holes.

#### How can we reduce the risk of gallstones?

- Make sure that any necessary weight-loss is achieved slowly and gradually, and then maintain a healthy weight: no yo-yo dieting.
- Eat a balanced diet with sufficient healthy fat content, as completely avoiding fat leads to inadequate gallbladder emptying and predisposes you to gallstone formation. Choose food high in fibre, vitamins and minerals.
- Exercise regularly and stay physically active to achieve optimal levels of cholesterol and triglycerides.

#### Do we need our gallbladders?

The gallbladder is an organ people can live without, fortunately. Bile produced in the liver flows through the bile duct directly into the small intestine, instead of being stored in the gallbladder.

#### Andrea's Digestive, Colon, Liver and Gallbladder Clinic

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