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Abdominal Wall and Incisional Hernias

WHAT IS A HERNIA?

An abdominal wall hernia occurs when an internal organ or tissue (most commonly bowel or fatty tissue) pushes through a weakness in the muscles of the abdominal wall. An incisional hernia is a specific type of abdominal wall hernia that develops at the site of a previous surgical incision, where the abdominal wall has been weakened during healing. Hernias can develop slowly over time or appear suddenly, particularly after strain such as heavy lifting, coughing, or pregnancy.

SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS

Hernia symptoms vary depending on size, location, and whether complications are present.
Common features include:

- A visible or palpable lump or bulge in the abdomen or groin
- The bulge may become more noticeable when standing, coughing, or straining
- Discomfort, aching, or pain, especially with activity or prolonged standing
- A feeling of pressure or heaviness in the abdomen
- Symptoms may reduce or disappear when lying flat

In some cases, hernias cause no pain and are detected incidentally during examination or imaging.

Complications of hernias may include:
- Incarceration
- Strangulation
- Bowel obstruction

HOW ARE HERNIAS DIAGNOSED?

Diagnosis is often straightforward and based on:
- Clinical examination
- Ultrasound
- CT scan, particularly for incisional or complex hernias

TREATMENT OPTIONS

The only definitive treatment is surgical repair.

Non-surgical Management
• Observation for small, asymptomatic hernias
• Weight management and smoking cessation
• Abdominal binders for comfort only

Surgical Repair
Options include:
• Open repair
• Laparoscopic repair
• Robotic-assisted repair

Most repairs involve mesh reinforcement.
Recovery and outlook: Most patients recover well, returning to light activities within weeks.

WHEN SHOULD YOU SEE A SPECIALIST?

Seek specialist review for a new or enlarging lump, pain, or changes in bowel habits. Symptoms such as severe pain, redness, nausea, vomiting, or sudden enlargement require urgent medical attention.