

Gallstones and Gallbladder Disease

Gallstones and gallbladder disease are common conditions that affect the digestive system. Many people have gallstones without ever knowing it, while others develop symptoms that can significantly affect quality of life.

WHAT ARE GALLSTONES?

Gallstones are hardened deposits that form inside the gallbladder – a small organ under the liver that stores bile, a digestive fluid. Stones may be made of cholesterol, pigment (bilirubin), or a combination of both. They can vary in size from tiny grains of sand to several centimetres.



SYMPOTMS AND SIGNS

Many people with gallstones have no symptoms (known as silent gallstones). When symptoms occur, they are usually caused by stones blocking the flow of bile.

Common symptoms include:

- Pain in the upper right or upper central abdomen, often after eating (especially fatty meals)
- Pain that may radiate to the back or right shoulder
- Nausea or vomiting
- Abdominal bloating or indigestion

More serious symptoms that require urgent medical attention include:

- Persistent or severe abdominal pain
- Fever or chills
- Yellowing of the skin or eyes (jaundice)
- Dark urine or pale stools



DIAGNOSIS

Gallstone disease is usually diagnosed based on symptoms and imaging tests.

Common diagnostic tests include:

- Ultrasound scan – the most common and accurate first test
- Blood tests to check for infection, liver inflammation, or bile duct blockage
- CT scan or MRI (including MRCP) in selected cases
- Endoscopic procedures (ERCP) if stones are suspected in the bile duct

COMPLICATIONS

If untreated, gallstones can lead to serious complications, including:

- Cholecystitis – inflammation or infection of the gallbladder
- Bile duct obstruction – stones blocking bile flow
- Pancreatitis – inflammation of the pancreas caused by migrating stones
- Cholangitis – a serious bile duct infection
- Rarely, gallbladder perforation



TREATMENT OPTIONS

Treatment depends on symptoms and complications.

No Symptoms:

Gallstones found incidentally usually do not require treatment. Observation is appropriate in most cases.

Symptomatic Gallstones:

Laparoscopic cholecystectomy (keyhole removal of the gallbladder) is the most effective and definitive treatment. Surgery is commonly recommended after recurrent pain or complications. Living without a gallbladder is generally well tolerated, and most patients return to normal digestion after recovery.



WHEN SHOULD YOU SEE A SPECIALIST?

You should seek medical review if you experience:

- Recurrent upper abdominal pain
- Pain associated with fever, jaundice, or vomiting
- Known gallstones with new or worsening symptoms

Early assessment helps prevent complications and allows timely, minimally invasive treatment.