

# Treating Gallstones

The gallbladder which helps digest food is an organ that most of us never think about -- unless we have a problem such as gallstones. Located beneath the liver, the gallbladder stores bile, which is released into the small intestine, where it helps break down fat from food. Gallstones occur when cholesterol and other substances in bile clump together and form hard, pebble-like deposits.

Gallstones vary in size from as tiny as a grain of sand to large enough to take up a sizable part of the gallbladder. Not everyone has symptoms, but the most common ones are intense pain in the upper right or middle of the abdomen, pain in the back or right shoulder, nausea or vomiting.

*“Gallstones, when they block the gallbladder duct that leads to the intestines can cause a severe amount of pain, and at times, in severe cases, can cause jaundice, which is yellowing of the skin.”*

Risk factors for gallstones include being female, 40 or older, having obesity, having liver disease or diabetes, a family history of the condition, or rapid weight loss.

To help diagnose the condition, doctors use imaging tests such as ultrasound to see the stones and where they're located.

*“Gallstones without symptoms usually don't need to be treated in which case we just tell patients to keep an eye out for symptoms. If they develop symptoms, they should contact us and let us know.”*

Surgery to remove the gallbladder, called Cholecystectomy, is the most common treatment. You can still digest food without a gallbladder. Other treatments include a procedure called ERCP, in which a thin tube is inserted down the esophagus and through the stomach to remove stones located outside the gallbladder. And medications that dissolve stones, which can take months or years to work.

*“Gallbladder surgery is the only way to permanently treat gallstones. Otherwise, they may come back. You can reduce the risk of gallstones returning by maintaining a healthy weight and exercising.”*

Another way to reduce your risk of developing gallstones is eating a low-fat diet. Talk to your healthcare provider about the best treatment plan for you.