

The 411 on Gallbladders

When people think of their overall health, the gallbladder is not typically something that comes to mind. In fact, most of the time the gallbladder is forgotten about altogether – until an issue occurs. But the gallbladder plays an important role in our overall health. So what is it, and what does it do?

“The function of the gallbladder is to concentrate a substance made by the liver called bile. Whenever we eat a meal, the gallbladder squeezes, pushes the food into the first part of our small bowel, and helps us digest fatty foods,” explains Dr. Andrei Froehling, an OSF HealthCare general surgeon.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), people over the age of 40, are overweight, have a chronic disease like diabetes, or eat a diet that is high in fat and cholesterol are most at risk for developing a gallbladder problem at some point in their life. The NIH also adds that women have a higher risk than men, because estrogen has been shown to increase bile cholesterol.

However, someone who might not have any of these risk factors may still develop a gallbladder issue at some point. And because gallbladder problems can present in a variety of ways, it is important to be able to recognize the symptoms.

“The most common sign or symptom of having issues with your gallbladder is whenever you eat fatty foods, or sometimes just any foods, you can start to experience pain a couple minutes afterwards in the right upper side of your belly. Sometimes it goes up to your right shoulder as well,” Dr. Froehling says.

“Sometimes the myriad of issues with the gallbladder can present atypically,” he adds. “Sometimes the pain is more upper rather than just to the right side. People can also experience pain going to their back, which could be a sign of a gallstone actually falling into the main biliary system and could cause pancreatitis.”

According to the NIH, if someone is experiencing a more chronic gallbladder issue they might experience symptoms like occasional nausea, vomiting, or increased bloating and flatulence – and oftentimes these symptoms will occur at night. Most people who experience these symptoms assume they are nothing to be concerned about and will self-diagnose themselves with an upset stomach or other common gastrointestinal issues, so they might go weeks or months before seeking treatment. At this point, the issue has typically worsened or the symptoms are occurring more frequently.

“Outside of stones, an issue people usually have with their gallbladder is something called biliary dyskinesia where the gallbladder does not contract properly, and this sometimes warrants removal of the gallbladder,” says Dr. Froehling.

A common problem that can arise is gallstones. According to the American College of Gastroenterology, gallstones are collections of cholesterol, bile pigment, or a combination of the two, which can form in the gallbladder or within the bile ducts of the liver. Signs of a gallstone can include pain, nausea, and vomiting. In some cases, as Dr. Froehling mentions, the pain radiates to the shoulder, or can cause chest pain and might mimic a heart attack. In any case, any type of pain should be taken seriously and be assessed by a medical professional.

“The most problematic symptom of a gallbladder issue is pain that persists and does not go away. This is usually a sign of what is called acute cholecystitis, which is an infection of the gallbladder usually because of a stone blocking the exit of it,” Dr. Froehling warns.

The key is to detect and treat gallbladder issues early. Treating a problem can range from a change in diet to gallbladder removal surgery. Talk to a healthcare provider if you are experiencing any of the symptoms that may indicate something is wrong. If you are experiencing fever, chills, severe abdominal pain, or yellowing of the skin (jaundice), go to the nearest emergency department or call 911.