

Don't stomach the pain

A significant number of emergency department (ED) visits are due to abdominal issues.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) released a study, confirming that gastrointestinal complaints accounted for 11% of total ED visits between 2016-2019, while just under 17% of those patients were admitted to the hospital. This is on par with the percentage of abdominal-related visits at all OSF HealthCare facilities. From April 1, 2023, through March of 2024, there were 36,340 ED visits related to abdominal issues, about 9% of the total visits.

Samuel Vazquez, MD, is a general surgeon with OSF HealthCare. Many of the patients he treats are suffering from severe stomach pain that ends up being something more serious.

"The most common reasons why people need to come into the emergency room is because they're having a gall bladder attack or appendix attack," Dr. Vazquez says. "If you've had surgery before, you're at risk for bowel obstructions so you can get pretty severe abdominal pain, along with vomiting and nausea. Hernias are the most common reason. The story is, you're usually out lifting something, mowing the yard, etc. and you get pain, then the pain doesn't go away."

Reasons to be seen

If you're experiencing severe abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and a fever, these are reasons to speak with your medical provider. Depending on the severity of symptoms, it could lead to an ED visit.

Don't stomach the pain, act fast

Dr. Vazquez says time is of the essence. If serious symptoms are presenting themselves, deal with them right away.

"When it comes to acute surgical issues like hernia, bowel obstruction, gall bladder attacks or appendicitis, the easiest and best time to take care of it is when it first presents itself," Dr. Vazquez says. "We could still take care of it a couple days later, but it does make everything that much harder."

Summer upswing

The warmer temperatures are often met with an increase in fun, outdoor activities. But Dr. Vazquez says there is also a correlation between the summer months and an increase in ED visits due to stomach issues.

"Especially for hernias because everyone is out and doing yard work, sports etc." Dr. Vazquez says. "Likewise, during the holiday season, it's much more common to see gall bladder pathology because everyone is eating out and not eating what they normally eat. You tend to have these attacks."

Prevention tips

Dr. Vazquez says there are daily things you can do to decrease the chance of an ED visit due to stomach issues. Avoid smoking, eat healthier, eat fewer processed foods, and exercise to maintain a healthy overall lifestyle.

While core exercises do strengthen the muscles around the abdomen and groin, it can also lead to hernias, especially when lifting heavy weights.