

Back to the stone age

[Greg Ward, MD](#), has a history lesson.

Thousands of years ago, he says humans used to kill a wild animal and eat well for a couple days. Then, they may go a few days or more without fatty meat. The gallbladder would be well at work. The organ stores bile, which helps absorb fat and keep you nourished.

Today, we eat three regular meals per day, and Dr. Ward, an OSF HealthCare general surgeon, says the storage vessel isn't as critical. But it still presents problems from time to time. Most notable are gallstones.

Gallstones basics

Dr. Ward says gallstones are, most of the time, made of cholesterol. Others, called pigment gallstones, are made of a substance called bilirubin. People with sickle cell anemia whose body is destroying a lot of red blood cells may have pigment gallstones, he says.

Why do gallstones form? Good question, doctors will probably respond.

"You can have a very high cholesterol level in your bile and not precipitate out stones. Other people have a lower level of cholesterol and get a bunch of stones," Dr. Ward says.

"So, we're not quite sure. It's something in the biochemistry in the wall of the gallbladder that protects us [from gallstones]. Some people don't have that," he adds.

Symptoms and treatment

Dr. Ward says 85% of people with gallstones don't have symptoms. Health care providers find them on an ultrasound when looking into kidney issues or a pregnancy.

"Just because you have gallstones doesn't mean you need to do anything about them," Dr. Ward says.

The time to act: "If you're having severe pit-of-the stomach pain about a third of the time. Two-thirds of the time, pain toward the right upper quadrant [or under your right ribcage]. Pain that doubles you over. Usually with some nausea or vomiting. Typically, after a heavy, fatty meal."

Moreover, Dr. Ward says gallstones tend to get worse over time. You may begin with one bout of symptoms per year. Five years later, you may be in severe pain once every two months. So, Dr. Ward says people typically talk with him about their quality of life and the right time to [remove the gallbladder](#). Typically, the person goes home the same day after the procedure.

"The gallbladder is not missed," Dr. Ward says.

Risks and prevention

Dr. Ward says to remember the "five Fs" risk factors for gallbladder disease: being female, being fertile, being 40 or older, having a family history of stones and being overweight (fat). Most of those are out of your control, so stay on top of your regular checkups, and talk to your provider about your risks. Otherwise, commit to a healthy diet and exercise to control your weight.