

Emergency Services

Gallstones

Where do gallstones come from?

Gallstones are hard, stone-like deposits that form in the gallbladder. Gallstones can be as small as a grain of sand or as big as a golf ball.

Your gallbladder is a small sac in your abdomen between your stomach and your liver. This small sac stores bile made by your liver. Bile helps your body digest fats.

When you eat fatty foods, the gallbladder squeezes bile out into your small bowel (small intestine). Most gallstones pass through the small bowel without you noticing anything. Larger gallstones can block the flow of bile if they move from the gallbladder and get stuck anywhere along its way to the small intestine. Really large gallstones get stuck in the gallbladder.

When a gallstone gets stuck, it hurts.

How do you know you have gallstones?

Signs of gallstones often come on all of a sudden, usually after eating fatty food. Because it comes on quickly, we call it a 'gallbladder attack'. Sometimes an attack comes on in the middle of the night.

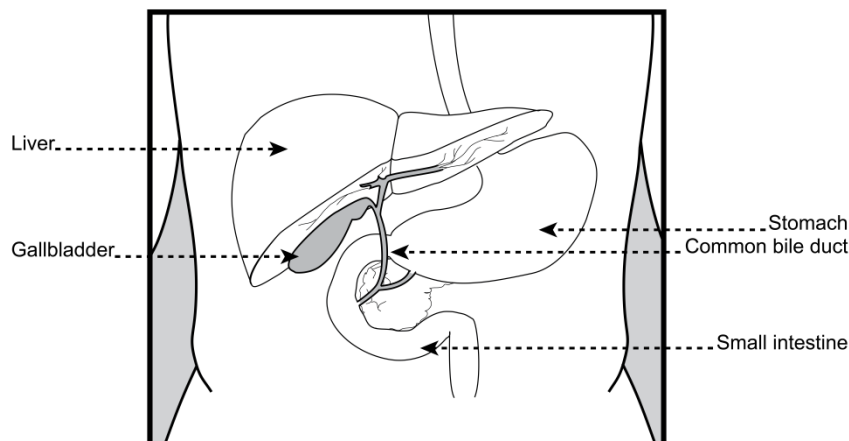
The most common sign of gallstones is pain. You might feel pain in any of these areas:

- your stomach
- in the upper right part of your abdomen, under the ribs
- in the back between your shoulder blades
- under your right shoulder

The pain can come and go or be constant. It can feel sharp, dull, or like cramps. The pain can last from minutes to several hours.

You might also feel sick to your stomach and throw up.

If the gallbladder gets inflamed or infected, you can also have a fever and not feel like eating.



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This information does not replace the advice given to you by your health care provider.

How to care for yourself at home

Treatment at home is focused on easing pain and preventing further attacks.

To treat your pain:

- Take medicine such as acetaminophen (Tylenol or store brand) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, or store brand).
- Your doctor may give you other pain medication. Take this as directed

To help prevent gallbladder attacks:

- Eat small meals 3 to 4 times a day. Do not skip meals.
- Choose foods that are low in fat and high in fibre. High fibre foods include vegetables, fruits, and whole grains.
- When you eat dairy products, choose only low-fat dairy products such as low fat yogurt, cheese, or milk.
- When you eat meat, trim off all visible fat.
- When you need cooking oil, choose canola, olive, or soybean oil.
- Instead of butter, choose non-hydrogenated margarine.
- Choose to drink beverages that are free of caffeine.
- If you choose to drink alcohol, drink no more than one alcoholic beverage a day.

People who are overweight are more likely to get gallstones. Maintain a healthy weight by exercising regularly and eating healthy foods.

People who lose weight rapidly over a short period are more likely to get gallstones. Stay away from fad diets or crash diets.

When to get help

Go see your family doctor or go to a walk-in clinic if:

- You have an attack of steady pain lasting from 30 minutes to a few hours.
- You have a yellowish colour to your skin or whites of your eyes, with or without pain.

Go to the nearest Emergency Department if:

- Your pain lasts more than 3 hours or does not get better with pain medicine.
- You cannot stop throwing up (vomiting).
- You have a chills or a fever over 38.0°C (100.4°F).

To learn more, it's good to ask:

- Your family doctor
- Fraser Health Virtual Care
1-800-314-0999 or live chat online at fraserhealth.ca/virtualcare
10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., daily
- HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf and hard of hearing) or go online at HealthLinkBC.ca