

Abdominal Pain

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Abdominal Pain

By Mayo Clinic staff, April 29, 2005

Abdominal pain is common. Episodes often stem from overeating or eating too much of a certain type of food. Sometimes a viral or bacterial infection is responsible. In other cases, the pain may be an early warning sign of something more serious.

Location of pain may indicate cause

The number of organs in your abdomen and the complex signals they send can make it tough to pinpoint the cause of abdominal pain. Sometimes, the location of your pain can help narrow the list.

Navel area. Pain near your bellybutton can be related to a small intestine disorder or an inflammation of your appendix (appendicitis). The appendix is a small, finger-shaped pouch that projects out from your colon on the lower right side of your abdomen. If it gets clogged or obstructed, it may become inflamed and filled with pus. Without treatment, an infected appendix can burst and cause a serious infection (peritonitis). In addition to abdominal pain, appendicitis may cause nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, fever, and the urge to pass gas or have a bowel movement.

Above the navel. The epigastric area — directly above the navel in the upper middle section of the abdomen — is where you might feel pain associated with stomach disorders. Persistent pain in this area may also signal a problem with your upper small intestine (duodenum), pancreas or gallbladder.

Below the navel. Pain below the navel (lower middle abdomen) that spreads to either side may signify a colon disorder. For women, pain in this area may also indicate a urinary tract infection or pelvic inflammatory disease.

Upper-left abdomen. It's uncommon to experience pain here. When you do, it may suggest a colon, stomach, spleen or pancreas problem.

Upper-right abdomen. Intense pain in the upper right abdomen is often related to inflammation of the gallbladder. The pain may extend to the center of your abdomen and penetrate to your back. Occasionally, an inflamed pancreas or duodenum can cause pain in this area as well.

Lower-left abdomen. Pain here most often suggests a problem in the lower colon, where food waste is expelled. Possible causes include inflammatory bowel disease or an infection in the colon known as diverticulitis.

Lower-right abdomen. Inflammation of the colon may cause pain in your lower right abdomen. The pain of appendicitis may also spread to the lower right abdomen.

Migrating pain. Abdominal pain has the unusual ability to travel along deep nerve pathways and emerge at sites away from the source of the problem. Pain related to gallbladder inflammation, for example, can spread to your chest and your right shoulder. Pain from a pancreas disorder may radiate up between your shoulder blades. This is often called "referred pain."

Managing the Pain

For mild abdominal pain caused by something you ate, it may help to sip water or suck on ice chips. When you feel better, try small amounts of bland foods, such as toast, applesauce or bananas. If stomach acid is an issue, an antacid may help.

When to see your doctor

Though most cases of abdominal pain aren't serious, sometimes medical treatment is essential. Consult your doctor if:

- The pain is severe, recurrent or persistent
- The pain gets worse
- The pain is accompanied by shortness of breath, dizziness, bleeding, vomiting or a high fever

Seek emergency help if:

- The abdominal pain is sudden and sharp
- The pain radiates to your chest, neck or shoulder
- You vomit blood
- You find blood in your stool or your stool turns black
- Your abdomen is swollen and tender

Be prepared to describe the pain, including where it hurts and what it feels like. Proper diagnosis and treatment can help you feel your best again.

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