

Live Healthy and Be Well!

“Gallbladder problems are not uncommon”

Stephen Jarrard, MD, FACS

We have seen several patients recently with complaints that turned out to be related to their gallbladder. It reminds me of a patient in the past who had been having trouble with abdominal pain requiring admission to the hospital. After being admitted to the hospital for acute pancreatitis, we were asked to assess his condition by his primary care doctor. The goal was to help him resolve his pancreatitis episode, but we needed to know *why* he had pancreatitis, and solve that problem to prevent future recurrence of this potentially dangerous condition.

In the United States, the two main causes of acute pancreatitis are alcohol abuse and gallbladder disease. As this man was a non-drinker, we focused with an ultrasound exam, and found him to have a sick gallbladder. After his successful laparoscopic gallbladder removal – he felt much better and should not have to worry about having pancreatitis again.

The gallbladder is a small pear shaped organ that is attached to the underside of the liver. The word “gall” comes from the old English word *gealla*, which meant yellow. If too much bile builds up in your blood, you will become “jaundiced” or yellow. The word gall also described “bitterness of spirit.” In the old days, someone who was bitter was thought to have an excess of bile, or a “lot of gall.” *Gealla* was derived from the Greek word *cholos*, which referred to gall and wrath, from which another word for gallbladder – the cholecyst – is taken. That is why taking out the gallbladder is known as a *cholecystectomy*.

The gallbladder acts as a storage reservoir for bile, a bitter, dark green substance which is produced by the liver and used as a “detergent” to help break down fat for digestion. Fat in its native form is not well absorbed in the gut, it needs bile to break it up so that it can be absorbed by the lining of the intestines and used in the body. Without bile, the oils and fats that we eat would literally “pass right through us” without being absorbed and we would begin to suffer malnutrition, as some fat is a necessary part of good nutrition, and the body must have it to function properly. When a fatty meal hits the duodenum, the first part of the small bowel after the stomach, the body sends a signal which causes the gallbladder to squeeze out some bile to mix with the food and begin to make the fat more soluble to the bowel.

If there are stones in the gallbladder, the lining of the gallbladder may become irritated and inflamed from this action, making you rather ill, give you a low grade temperature, and elevate your white blood cell count – this condition is known as *cholecystitis*. If the gallbladder does not function or empty properly when it gets the signal, it may cause similar symptoms without the inflammation – this is known as *biliary dyskinesia*, both conditions may present the same as nausea and vomiting with right upper quadrant pain (just under the right rib cage) after eating a fatty meal.

An ultrasound exam of the right upper quadrant area will show stones in the gallbladder, sometimes a thickened wall, and even fluid surrounding the gallbladder in cholecystitis. If you have gallbladder symptoms and your ultrasound is “normal” (no stones or inflammation), a special nuclear medicine scan will indicate the dysfunction of the gallbladder. The treatment for both conditions is surgical removal of the gallbladder – which we will be happy to help you with! Once a big operation requiring a long incision under the ribs and several days in the hospital post operatively, the laparoscopic approach has turned this operation into a same day surgery procedure – in most cases.

Don't worry – if your gallbladder is removed, your liver will learn to compensate and produce more bile when needed to help you with digestion. After a brief adjustment period of two or three weeks, most people don't even notice or think about their missing gallbladder. And, they usually feel much better without it as a source of pain, nausea, and limitation to their quality of life.

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