

Hernia

When a portion of the intestine bulges out through a weak spot in the abdominal muscles, the resulting lump under the skin is called a hernia. Hernias most often occur in the groin and are called inguinal hernias. These are more common in men than women. Some hernias, however, bulge out near the navel and are called umbilical hernias.

The symptoms of a hernia may come on suddenly or develop gradually. A hernia can cause a feeling of pressure, burning, or a sensation of “giving way” at the site of the weak muscle. A noticeable bulge or lump can be felt and sometimes seen. The symptoms are more likely to be felt while lifting, coughing, or straining. The lump may stay out for a while, but it usually disappears back into the abdomen when lying down. Cramps in the abdomen may occur if the lump of intestine is caught and cannot slide back into the abdomen easily.

Some people are simply born with a weak spot in the abdominal wall and are more susceptible to hernias. Occasionally, even an infant may be born with a hernia. Most often, however, hernias are caused by not being fit, lifting things that are too heavy, or using incorrect lifting techniques. A woman can sometimes get a hernia at the navel due to the amount of stretching that can occur in late pregnancy. Coughing or straining during a bowel movement can also increase pressure in the abdomen and cause a hernia.

To help prevent hernias, always breath out while lifting or doing activities that use the abdominal muscles. In other words, remember to always “exhale with effort.” Avoid lifting extremely heavy objects by yourself—ask for help when you need it. And always use proper lifting techniques when you do have to pick up something heavy. Get as close to the item as possible before you begin lifting. Bend your knees, suck in your abdominal muscles, exhale as you lift, and rise up with your legs. Regular exercises to strengthen your abdominal muscles can also help prevent a hernia. Finally, don’t strain during bowel movements, and take precautions to prevent constipation.

Call your doctor or medical professional if you think that you might have a hernia. Call immediately if you have an unexplained groin bump or if you experience increasing pain in your abdomen, groin, or scrotum. Also call immediately if you experience even mild pain in your abdomen, groin, or scrotum for longer than seven days or if swelling continues for longer than seven days. Your medical professional can give you a complete evaluation and determine whether you have a hernia and how serious it is. There are no treatments, such as injections or medications, that will improve a hernia; the only treatment is surgery. Most hernias don’t require surgery, however, unless they cause you a great deal of pain, interfere with your daily life, or pose further risks to your health.

When surgery is needed, it usually does not require an overnight hospital stay. Usually the repair involves a relatively simple operation with few complications. As with any surgical procedure, however, bleeding or infection can sometimes be a problem. About 5 to 10 percent of hernias may come back again after surgery. Other possible complications for inguinal hernia repair include irritation of the sensory nerves that run through the groin area (which can cause either temporary or permanent tingling). Still other complications include numbness, or pain in the skin of the scrotum or thigh. In rare cases there may be damage to the blood supply of a testicle, which might cause it to temporarily swell up causing pain.

For approximately one to two weeks after surgery for a hernia, you should be very careful and decrease your level of activity. Walking and a normal diet are usually fine, but you should avoid driving. Do not return to full activity, such as lifting heavy objects, for at least six to eight weeks so as to lessen the chance of the weak spot reopening.

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