Gallbladder Q&A

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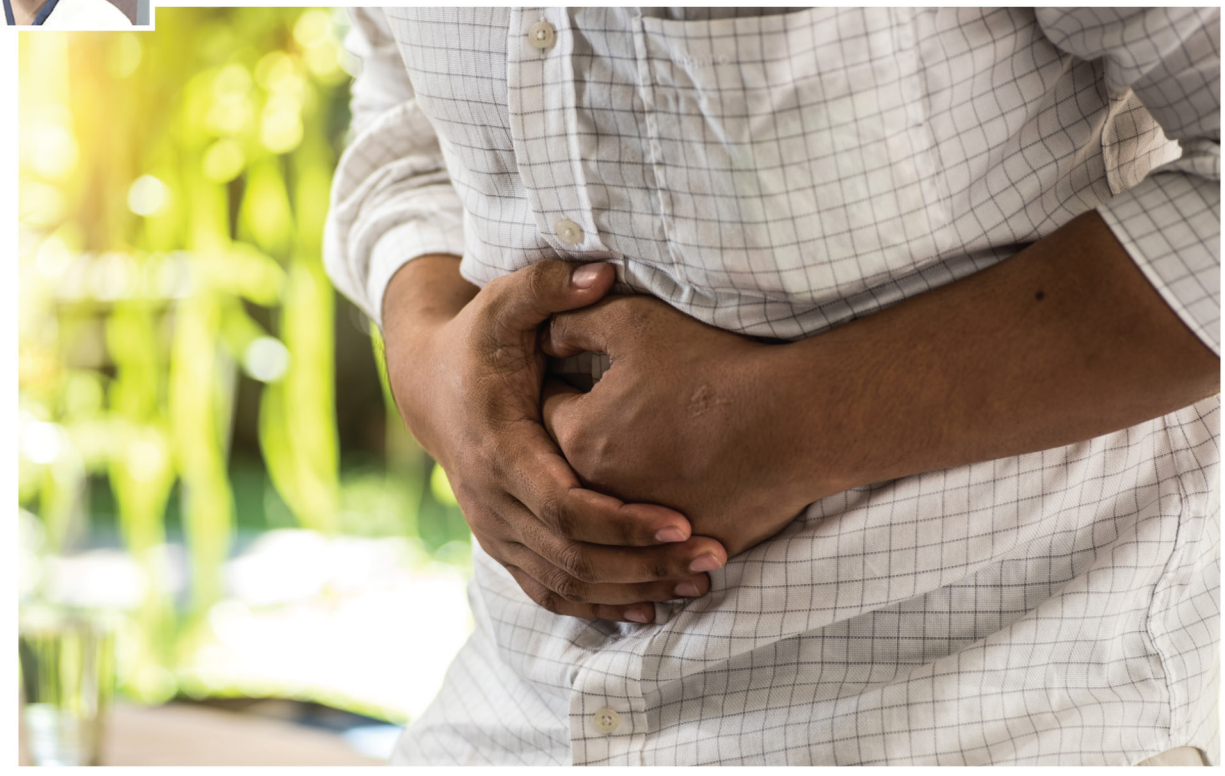

Do you know anyone who has undergone gallbladder surgery? Chances are you do! There are an estimated 750,000 gallbladder surgeries per year in the United States. Gallbladder problems are a very common reason to visit a family doctor or GI doctor (gastroenterologist). Usually people are experiencing episodes of abdominal pain or nausea and are looking for answers to why they feel bad. Here are some frequently asked questions about gallbladder disease.

What is a gallbladder? The gallbladder is an egg-sized hollow organ that stores bile which is produced in the liver. In fact the gallbladder is partially attached to the liver and joins the duct system that exits the liver.

Where in your body is the gallbladder located? The gallbladder is located in the right side of the upper abdomen.

Can it ever be located somewhere else? Yes. A condition named situs inversus is present in 1/100,000 people. In these situations the person's organs are located on the opposite side of normal. I have encountered this twice during my career.

What does the gallbladder do? The purpose of the gallbladder is to store bile and then eject the bile into the intestine when you eat.

Why is bile important? Bile acts as a detergent to break fatty foods into smaller particles which are more easily digested.

Does the gallbladder make bile? No. The gallbladder only stores the bile. The bile is actually produced in the liver. A duct system exits the liver and a small channel between the gallbladder and this duct system allows the passage of bile into and out of the gallbladder.

How does the gallbladder know to send bile into the intestine? Sensors in the lining of the stomach are activated by fat molecules that you eat. Those sensors release a chemical into your blood stream call CCK (cholecystokinin). The CCK travels to the gallbladder and tells it to push the bile into the duct system that ends in the intestine.

What are gallstones? Sometimes a crystal forms within the stored bile of the gallbladder and slowly a stone grows. This is similar to a pearl forming within an oyster. Stones can grow quite large or they may remain small like sand particles.

How do gallstones affect you? At times, these stones or particles can obstruct the outlet of the gallbladder. If an obstruction is present while the gallbladder contracts to eject bile, a person will generally feel a sharp attack of pain and possibly nausea and vomiting. Some people only sense nausea but no pain. These attacks are generally after eating.

Where is the pain located? The location of the pain varies from patient to patient. Most frequently the pain is in the middle of the upper abdomen (the epigastrium). Others experience pain in the right side of the abdomen. Some will relate pain from both locations. Often this pain radiates to the back or shoulder blade. Rarely the pain is in the right side of the lower abdomen or left side of the upper abdomen.

How long does the pain last? Fortunately, most gallbladder attacks will fade away with a few minutes to hours. Some attacks are minor and others create severe pain. Once a person has developed a gallbladder attack, they will probably have additional attacks in the future.

Can more serious problems occur? Sometimes a gallbladder becomes completely obstructed to the point that infection is produced. This requires immediate attention. In rare cases a gallbladder may actually rupture.

How do you know if you have gallstones? The best test to look for gallstones is an ultrasound of the abdomen. This will not detect all gallstones, however ultrasound is about 95% accurate. A CT scan is not as good at finding gallstones as an ultrasound, but it is sometimes helpful.

What if I have gallbladder symptoms but I do not have gallstones? The bile within the gallbladder can become thick like motor oil. When this happens, it can be difficult for the gallbladder to eject the fluid through its outlet. Imagine trying to suck thick syrup through a straw? The gallbladder will send your brain the same signals as if it were obstructed.