



**University
Hospitals Sussex**
NHS Foundation Trust

Gallstones

Accident and emergency

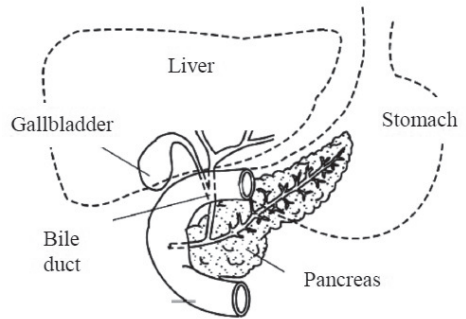
Patient information

What is the gallbladder?

Your gallbladder is a small pouch located just under your liver, beneath your right rib cage.

It stores and concentrates bile, a greenish-brown liquid made by your liver.

Bile helps your body digest food. Bile passes into your small intestine through tubes called bile ducts.



Location of the gallbladder

What are gallstones?

Gallstones are small, hard lumps that form in the gallbladder. They are made from substances in bile, especially cholesterol.

- Gallstones can stay inside the gallbladder or move into the bile ducts.
- About 5.5 million adults in the UK have gallstones.

They are more common in:

- Women
- People who are overweight
- Adults over 60 years old.

What are the symptoms?

Many people with gallstones have no symptoms and may never know they have them.

However, gallstones can sometimes cause the following:

- Pain in the upper abdomen, either in the centre or right side. This pain can be severe, come and go, and last for hours. It may be hard to get comfortable.
- Ongoing pain under your right rib cage, especially when you move.
- Nausea or bloating, often after a fatty meal.

If a gallstone moves into the bile duct, you may also experience:

- Jaundice: yellowing of the skin or eyes, dark urine (pee), or pale stools (poo).
- Inflammation of the pancreas (known as pancreatitis) causing upper abdominal pain.
- Fever due to infections bile ducts (cholangitis) or gallbladder (cholecystitis).

How are gallstones diagnosed?

If your doctor suspects gallstones, they may order tests such as:

- **Abdominal ultrasound scan**
 - Similar to a pregnancy scan
 - Can show stones in the gallbladder.
- **Blood tests**
 - Check for signs of infection or if stones have moved into the bile duct.
- **Endoscopy**
 - A small camera is passed through your mouth into your intestine
 - Helps detect stones in the bile duct.
- **MRI or CT scans**
 - Sometimes used to get a clearer picture of your gallbladder and bile ducts.

How are gallstones treated?

Not all gallstones need treatment. If they are causing symptoms, options include:

- Medication
- Surgery (usually to remove the gallbladder)
- Endoscopy (to remove stones from bile ducts)
- Shockwave therapy (less common).

A specialist will discuss the best option for your situation.

Living with gallstones

Gallstones grow in the gall bladder and can cause episodes of pain. Symptoms usually get worse after eating fatty foods or a large meal. The pain is often cramping and intermittent but usually goes away after a few hours. You can take steps to reduce discomfort:

- Avoid large or fatty meals
- Eat smaller portions and a balanced diet
- Keep a food diary to identify triggers
- A low-fat diet may help reduce symptoms
- If you are overweight, losing weight gradually can lower your risk.

When to seek help

Seek immediate medical attention if you experience:

- Persistent abdominal pain
- Fever
- Jaundice (yellow skin or eyes).

Further support

For general medical advice please use the **NHS website**, the **NHS 111** service, walk-in-centres, or your GP.

- The NHS website www.nhs.uk provides online health information and guidance
- There are walk-in and urgent treatment services at Brighton Station, Crawley Urgent Treatment Centre, Lewes Victoria Hospital, Horsham Minor Injuries Unit and Bognor Regis War Memorial Hospital.