

Deciding what to do about gallstones

This short decision aid is to help you decide what treatment to choose if you have gallstones.

This document is a summary of the online patient decision aid which has much more information to help you. You can access it online at :<http://sdm.rightcare.nhs.uk/pda/gallstones/>

The main treatment options for gallstones are:

- **Surgical management:** this means having an operation to remove the gallbladder with the gallstones inside. This is nearly always done as keyhole surgery (laparoscopic cholecystectomy) through small incisions.
- **Conservative care:** this means taking medicines and/or making dietary and other lifestyle changes to try to relieve symptoms and get rid of the gallstones, and prevent them from coming back.

Some people start with conservative care and then move to surgical management. Others have surgery straight away. Their choice of treatment may depend on whether they have symptoms, how often they have them, how bad they are, and if they have had gallstones and/or complications in the past.

The decisions people with gallstones are making include:

- **My gallstones were found when I was having tests for something else, and I have no symptoms. Should I wait and see if they will go away on their own?**
- **I have some pain from my gallstones. Can I get rid of my gallstones with medication and changes to my lifestyle?**
- **I've had gallstones for a while and the pain is getting worse. Is it time for me to have an operation to remove my gallbladder?**

A person's choice of treatment may change over time. It may be affected by changes in how their gallstones are affecting them. This decision aid aims to help people make the right choice now, and if they decide to change their mind later on.

What are my options?

	Surgical management (laparoscopic cholecystectomy)	Conservative care (painkillers, dietary changes)
What is the treatment?	This means having an operation to take out the gallbladder. This is nearly always done as keyhole surgery (laparoscopic cholecystectomy) through small incisions in the abdomen, with a general anaesthetic. A small number of people have their gallbladder removed through a single large incision in the abdomen if the surgeon decides this is preferable during the keyhole surgery. This is called open surgery.	Conservative care means taking medicines which aim to relieve pain, reduce muscle spasm in the gallbladder and intestine, or help to dissolve gallstones. It also includes dietary changes to reduce the amount of fat in the diet and other lifestyle changes to help people slowly lose weight if they are overweight.
What is the effect on gallstones?	When the gallbladder is removed, this also gets rid of the gallstones that are inside. Keyhole surgery and open surgery are equally effective in removing the gallbladder.	Taking painkillers or medicines to reduce muscle spasm will not get rid of gallstones. Taking medicines to dissolve the stones may reduce them in size or get rid of them for a while [1] Reducing the amount of fat in the diet won't affect gallstones already in the gallbladder. It may help to prevent new gallstones from forming.
What is the effect on symptoms and how you feel?	In people with gallstones causing symptoms, having the gallbladder taken out should get rid of symptoms. If symptoms do return after the gallbladder is removed, this means that the original symptoms may have been due, partly or completely, to something else. [2]	Taking painkillers and drugs that reduce muscle spasm may reduce pain caused by gallstones. [3] [4] Non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are more effective at relieving pain than anti-spasmodic medicines. [5] Some people with severe pain or if they cannot tolerate NSAIDS may need stronger painkillers for example morphine. Changing to a low fat diet may reduce the likelihood of getting biliary colic (which is painful), but there hasn't been much research about this.

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How long does it take to get better?	After surgery, gallstone symptoms should disappear straight away. The wound may be painful for a few days, and most people need time off work - usually about 10-14 days.	After taking painkillers or antispasmodic medicines, painful symptoms should improve within 30-60 minutes. This may be quicker if medicines are injected into a muscle instead of being swallowed. These medicines won't stop symptoms from coming back. Taking medicines to dissolve gallstones may help people to feel better within a few weeks. They may not prevent gallstones from happening again and symptoms from coming back. Changing to a low fat diet won't affect recovery from gallstones that are already in the gallbladder. It may help reduce the likelihood of getting new gallstones.

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What are the unwanted effects of treatment?	Short term unwanted effects of surgery may include nausea and vomiting on the day of the operation and pain around the wound. Complication rates for keyhole and open surgery are low. Delaying keyhole surgery in people with painful gallstones may lead to more complications and it's more likely that the surgeon will need to switch to open surgery during the operation. [6] Unwanted effects include bleeding and infection, which can happen after any surgery, as well as bile duct damage which is rare but potentially serious and may require a second operation, and leakage of bile. Just over half of people go home on the same day as keyhole surgery. This is unlikely to increase the likelihood of complications compared with staying in hospital overnight after the operation. [7]	Medicines used to treat symptoms of gallstones may cause side effects, such as stomach problems, dizziness, headaches and skin rashes. [8] [9] [10] Other unwanted effects result from not having the gallbladder removed. This means that some people with gallstones and no symptoms may start getting symptoms or symptoms of gallstones may get worse or happen more often. Complications of gallstones may occur, such as inflammation in the gallbladder (cholecystitis) or pancreas (pancreatitis) or obstructive jaundice.

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What are the effects on your life?	<p>If a person has surgery for gallstones, they are most unlikely to get them again. If they didn't have symptoms before their operation, they will see little difference in the way they feel. If they had symptoms which were due to their gallstones, these will go away, and they will not need to take medicines to relieve pain or other symptoms of gallstones. If they had symptoms which were not due to their gallstones, these are likely to stay after surgery. People with continuing symptoms may need further tests to find out why they are happening, followed by more treatment. Removing the gallbladder leaves one or more scars on the abdomen. After open surgery, there will be a single scar about 10-15 cm long. After keyhole surgery there will be one to four small scars, upto 1 cm in diameter. In time, scars should fade and look smaller. After the gallbladder is removed it isn't necessary to stick to a low fat diet. People who have been on a low fat diet may put on weight if they switch back to eating the way they did before. Eating a healthy diet without a lot of fat may help people avoid putting on weight.</p>	<p>For people with gallstones who do not have any symptoms, conservative care means making permanent changes to meals, by reducing the amount of fatty foods they eat and, if they are overweight, eating more healthily and taking more exercise. Those with symptoms will need to make similar changes and may need regular medication to relieve their symptoms and/or try to dissolve their gallstones.</p>

What are the pros and cons of each option?

People with gallstones have different experiences about the health problem and views on treatment. Choosing the treatment option that is best for the patient means considering how the consequences of each treatment option will affect their life.

Here are some questions people may want to consider about treatment for gallstones:

- I have gallstones but no symptoms at the moment, how worried am I about getting symptoms in the future?
- How much are my symptoms affecting my work, family and/or social life?
- I have symptoms, how important is it that I have treatment to make me feel better quickly?
- How do I feel about the potential complications of having surgery?
- How do I feel about taking time out of my occupation in order to have surgery?

How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?

Go to <http://sdm.rightcare.nhs.uk/pda/gallstones/> for more detailed information about treatments for **Gallstones**. People using this type of information say they understand the health problem and treatment choices more clearly, and why one treatment is better for them than another. They also say they can talk more confidently about their reasons for liking or not liking an option with health professionals, friends and family.

References

References can be viewed online at <http://sdm.rightcare.nhs.uk/pda/gallstones/references/>