

# **MANAGING YOUR APPENDICITIS**

## **What Is Appendicitis?**

The appendix is a tiny, worm-shaped structure attached to the part of the bowel (large intestine) called the cecum. Appendicitis is swelling (inflammation) and infection of the appendix.

Although the appendix has no real purpose in the body, an infected appendix can be life-threatening.

Appendicitis occurs in up to 10% of the population, most often in people between 10 and 30 years old. With prompt treatment, appendicitis has an excellent prognosis.

## **What Causes Appendicitis?**

The exact cause is unclear. The opening from the cecum to the appendix becomes blocked (obstructed), which leads to inflammation and growth of bacteria. Infection prevents blood flow, gangrene begins, and the appendix can burst open (rupture, or perforate).

Things that can obstruct the appendix include fecaliths (tiny pieces of undigested vegetable surrounded by stool) and enlarged lymph nodes caused by viruses, parasites, or tumors.

## **What Are the Symptoms of Appendicitis?**

The classic symptom is pain in the abdomen (belly) that starts in the upper middle part near the umbilicus (belly button). The pain then usually moves down to the right lower corner of the abdomen.

Movement, coughing, and straining make the pain worse. Nausea, vomiting, abdominal swelling, and low-grade fever also occur. Waiting too long before seeking medical care can result in a burst appendix.

A burst appendix is a medical emergency and can produce an abdominal mass with pain, and a temperature higher than 102° F.

### **How Is Appendicitis Diagnosed?**

The health care provider makes a diagnosis by checking symptoms and doing a physical examination. Blood tests may help, but no specific blood tests can diagnose appendicitis. X-rays including ultrasound (using sound waves to view abdominal organs) and computed tomography (CT) may help in some cases to rule out other diseases and show an inflamed swollen appendix.

### **How Is Appendicitis Treated?**

Treatment is removal of the appendix, an operation called an appendectomy. An appendectomy is the most common emergency abdominal operation done in the United States. The preferred operation is by laparoscopy (laparoscopic appendectomy). A lighted tube (scope) is passed into the abdomen to see and remove the appendix. Another operation involves making a cut in the lower right side of the abdomen to remove the appendix (open appendectomy). Antibiotics for infection and drugs for pain, and maybe stool softeners, are usually prescribed.

In simple cases, most people will be in the hospital for 1 day or may go home the same day of surgery. For a ruptured appendix, the hospital stay will be longer, to give intravenous antibiotics and monitor for complications.

### **DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Appendicitis**

✓ **DO** report your symptoms. The earlier the diagnosis is made, the better the prognosis.

Delays can lead to a burst appendix.

✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have vomiting, diarrhea or blood in your stool, a mass in your abdomen, or abdominal pain with fever.

✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you need a referral to a surgeon.

⊗ **DON'T** miss follow-up appointments.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- MedlinePlus Health Information U.S. National Library of Medicine: Website:  
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/appendicitis.html>
- American College of Surgeons: Tel: (800) 621-4111, (312) 202-5000; Website:  
<http://www.facs.org>

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