

HERNIA

What is a hernia?

A hernia occurs when tissues or organs bulge through a weak point in the wall of the belly (abdomen).

There are a number of different types of hernia, including:

- Hiatus hernia— Part of the stomach pushes up into the chest through the opening in the diaphragm (the layer of muscle separating the stomach from the chest) where the oesophagus (food pipe) passes through. It is sometimes called a hiatal hernia.
- Inguinal hernia— The bowel or other abdominal tissue pushes through the abdominal wall in the lower part of the abdomen, causing a lump in the groin. Inguinal hernias are more common in men.
- Umbilical hernia— The bowel or abdominal tissue pushes through the abdominal wall near the belly button (naval).
- Incisional hernia— The bowel or other abdominal tissue pushes through the abdominal wall where it's been made weak by surgery or trauma.
- Femoral hernia — The bowel or other abdominal tissue pushes through the abdominal wall near where the leg joins the body. Femoral hernias are more common in women.
- Epigastric hernias — The abdominal fat pushes through the abdominal wall between the belly button and below the rib cage.

What causes a hernia?

Some hernias are there at birth. Some occur after surgery.

Other times, weaknesses develop in the muscles of the abdomen over time and eventually 'give out', causing a hernia.

Hernias are generally more common in people whose abdomens are under more pressure than usual. This includes people who do a lot of heavy lifting, who are obese, pregnant, have a chronic cough, constipation, sneezing or diarrhoea, or people who smoke.

What are the symptoms of a hernia?

The symptoms of a hernia depend on the size of the hernia and where it is. Typical symptoms include:

- a bulge or lump in the groin or abdomen
- pain, burning, aching, heaviness or discomfort, especially when coughing, straining or lifting
- a pulling sensation around the lump or bulge

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Some people may experience shooting hernia pain, vomiting, and constipation. Some hernias may not cause any symptoms at all.

If you have a hiatus hernia in your stomach, you may also experience:

- heartburn
- reflux
- pain in the chest or stomach
- difficulty swallowing, or bringing food or drink back up into your mouth

If you have an inguinal hernia in your groin, you may also experience:

- weakness or pressure in your groin
- swelling and pain around the testicles

Can a hernia be prevented?

Some people are born with weaker muscles that make hernias more likely. But you can reduce your chances of a hernia by:

- losing weight if you are overweight or obese
- quitting smoking
- limiting alcohol
- using proper lifting techniques to avoid straining

Complications of a hernia

Occasionally, tissue from inside the abdomen gets trapped in the hernia. Usually, the tissue can be gently pushed back into the abdomen. But if it cannot, it is a medical emergency. This is called a **strangulated hernia**. If the hernia is trapped and you are in serious pain, seek emergency medical attention.

A hiatus hernia can lead to bad reflux. In the long term, this can damage the oesophagus and make it difficult to swallow.

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