

Gallstones

Information about gallstones and gallbladder removal

What are gallstones

Your liver makes bile to digest fat. The gallbladder beneath it stores and concentrates bile, squeezing it after meals through bile ducts into the duodenum (first part of the small bowel).

Gallstones are hardened material in the gallbladder. Many cause no symptoms. Treatment depends on stone location, symptoms and general health.

Common symptoms

- Strong, steady upper abdominal pain, often under the right ribs or centrally.
- Pain may spread to the back or right shoulder and follow meals, especially fatty meals.
- Nausea or vomiting. Attacks often last about 30 minutes to several hours, settling if the blockage clears.

Problems gallstones can cause

Problem	What happens	Typical clue
Biliary colic	A stone temporarily blocks the gallbladder outlet	Steady upper abdominal pain that later settles
Cholecystitis	The gallbladder becomes inflamed, usually after persistent blockage	Ongoing pain, tenderness, fever or feeling unwell
Bile duct stone	A stone enters and may block the common bile duct	Jaundice, dark urine, pale stools or bile duct infection
Pancreatitis	A stone obstructs drainage near the pancreatic duct opening	Severe upper abdominal pain, often going through to the back

When to seek urgent medical help

Get urgent help for severe pain, pain lasting a few hours, fever, chills, yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, pale stools, repeated vomiting or feeling very unwell. Do not wait for a routine appointment. Call 000 for collapse, severe breathlessness or chest pain.

How gallstones are assessed

Assessment usually starts with discussing your pain, examination, ultrasound and blood tests. Suspected bile duct stones may need bile duct MRI (MRCP) or another test. ERCP treats duct blockage using an endoscope; it does not remove the gallbladder.

Treatment

No symptoms. Stones found by chance in a normal gallbladder usually need no treatment. Common bile duct stones generally need treatment even without pain.

While waiting. Avoid trigger foods and rapid weight loss. Smaller, lower-fat meals may help. Use pain relief as advised. Diet does not reliably remove stones.

Surgery. Gallbladder removal is usually offered for symptoms or complications. I will discuss benefits, timing and your risks. Bile duct stones may need ERCP or surgical removal; severe inflammation or infection may need hospital treatment.

What does a cholecystectomy involve

Under general anaesthetic, keyhole (laparoscopic) surgery removes the gallbladder and stones through small cuts after sealing its duct (cystic duct) and artery and separating it from the liver. Bile duct X-rays may be taken.

COLORECTAL AND GENERAL SURGEON

Inflammation may make complete removal unsafe. Leaving a small part (subtotal cholecystectomy) or using an open incision aims to reduce bile duct injury risk. A drain or further treatment may be needed.

You can live without a gallbladder: liver bile still flows through bile ducts into the small bowel. Surgery may not relieve symptoms from another condition.

Before surgery, follow fasting and medicine instructions, report allergies and all medicines, and arrange transport and support after discharge.

Recovery after keyhole surgery

- Many go home the same day or after one night. Abdominal and shoulder-tip discomfort are common for the first few days. Recovery takes longer after open or complicated surgery.
- Walk early, increasing activity gradually. Office work often resumes within 1 to 2 weeks; heavy work may take longer. Follow individual lifting and exercise advice.
- Eat healthily as tolerated; smaller meals may help initially. Temporary bloating or loose stools can occur. Persistent diarrhoea or ongoing symptoms need review.
- Drive only once anaesthetic restrictions have passed, medicines do not impair you, and you can comfortably control the car and perform an emergency stop. Check your insurer's requirements.

Possible risks

Risks include anaesthetic problems, bleeding, wound or chest infection, blood clots, wound hernia, bile leakage, retained bile duct stones, bile duct or nearby organ injury, pancreatitis and ongoing symptoms. Complications may need another procedure or operation.

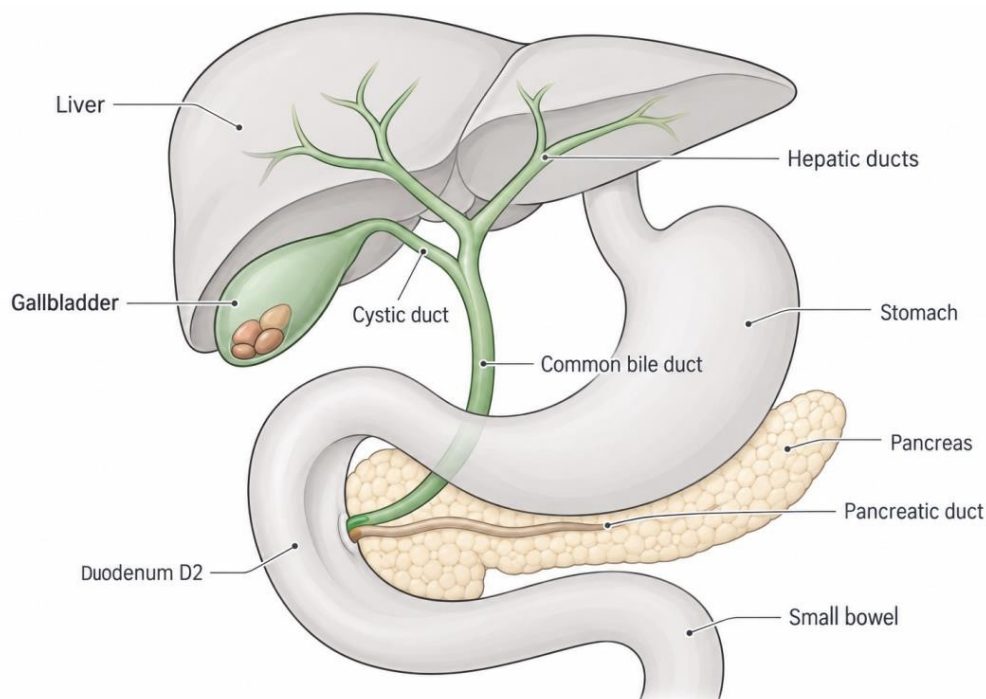
When to seek help after surgery

Seek urgent review for worsening or uncontrolled pain, fever, increasing wound redness or discharge, yellow skin or eyes, repeated vomiting, abdominal swelling, or calf pain and swelling. Call 000 for chest pain, severe breathlessness or collapse.

Your treatment plan

Before discharge, confirm wound care, medicines, and review of your operation and tissue results.

My plan: further tests / surgery and timing / medicines / activity / results and review



The gallbladder and bile ducts in relation to the liver, pancreas and bowel.

Updated October 2026