WHAT IS A HERNIA?

A hernia happens when tissue, intestines, or other organs push through an opening between muscles or connective tissue. This will usually cause a bulge you can see under your skin. Typically, hernias happen in the abdomen or groin, but they can also occur in the thigh or genitals.

Unfortunately, there is no age-limit on hernias. Hernias are extremely common. Your risks of developing a hernia are higher if you are male, have a family history, smoke, are overweight, or have had previous abdominal surgery.

Types of hernias include:

- **Groin (inguinal) hernia** – Often caused by heavy lifting or straining, this type of hernia is most commonly suffered by men.
- **Upper thigh (femoral) hernia** – More common among older women, this is a type of hernia in which tissue or part of the intestine protrudes into the groin.
- **Hiatal hernia** – This condition results in part of the stomach protruding through an opening in the diaphragm.
- **Navel (umbilical) hernia** – Occurs when part of the intestine or other tissue pushes through the bellybutton. In children, this usually disappears by preschool years.
- **Abdominal (ventral) hernias** – These develop in various areas of the abdomen. Incisional hernias happen at the site of a previous surgery.
What are the symptoms?

Recognizing these symptoms is the first step in getting help for a hernia.

**Inguinal hernia symptoms**

The main symptom of inguinal hernia is a visible bulge in your groin area. In men an inguinal hernia may extend down into the scrotum and cause an enlarged scrotum. Small hernias may move back and forth through an opening in the abdomen and cause no symptoms.

Symptoms of inguinal hernias that slide back and forth include:

- A bulge or lump in your lower abdominal area or groin near the thigh that increases in size when you strain; is noticeable when you are standing but may disappear when you lie down.
- Sudden pain in your groin when exercising or straining.
- A feeling of weakness, pressure, burning or aching in your groin. The condition should not cause panic, but you may need surgery if complications develop.

The bulging intestine can get trapped in the abdominal wall and cause a bowel obstruction or blood supply may be cut off and can cause tissue to die.

Seek medical care immediately if you experience these symptoms:

- Severe pain and redness
- Pressure or pain that keeps getting worse
- Fever
- Rapid heart rate
- Poor appetite, nausea and vomiting

The symptoms of an inguinal hernia may resemble other medical conditions or problems.

Always consult your doctor for a complete diagnosis.

**Femoral hernia symptoms**

- A bulge in the upper thigh next to the groin.
- Most femoral hernias cause no symptoms. Groin discomfort may worsen when standing, lifting heavy objects, or straining.
- In severe cases, abdominal pain, nausea, and vomiting.

**Hiatal hernia symptoms**

Most of the time, a hiatal hernia does not produce noticeable symptoms. Heartburn, burping, nausea, and vomiting may be present with a sliding hiatal hernia.

You can ease the symptoms of a hiatal hernia by losing weight, eliminating alcohol and spicy foods and eating smaller meals. Over-the-counter antacids/medications or prescription drugs may offer relief.

**Navel (umbilical) hernia symptoms**

If you suspect that your baby has an umbilical hernia, talk with your pediatrician. Seek emergency care:

- Appears to be in pain.
- Begins to vomit.
- Has tenderness, swelling or discoloration at the site of the hernia.

Similar guidelines apply to adults.

**Abdominal (ventral) hernias symptoms**

- Mild discomfort in your abdominal area.
- Pain in your abdomen.
- Outward bulging of skin or tissues in your abdominal area.
- Nausea.
- Vomiting.
How is a hernia diagnosed?

A hernia is most often diagnosed through a medical history and physical examination. Your doctor will ask you questions about your hernia symptoms and a review of your medical history.

Your physician may recommend a variety of diagnostic imaging tests including: High-resolution computerized tomography (CT) scan, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) gastrointestinal (GI) contrast study, or ultrasound may be recommended for woman, because it allows doctors to check for other pelvic conditions, such as ovarian cysts or fibroids, that can cause abdominal pain.

**Inguinal hernia**

During the physical exam your doctor will look for and feel for a bulge in your groin or scrotal area. You may be asked to stand and cough to make the hernia appear. Diagnostic procedures for an inguinal hernia may also include:

- X-rays to produce images of internal tissues, bones and organs.
- CT (computed tomography) scan to produce multiple images inside the body to check for blockage of the intestines.

**Hiatal hernia**

To diagnose a hiatal hernia the following procedures may be ordered:

- Chest X-ray.
- Upper endoscopy allows your physician to examine the inside of your esophagus, stomach and duodenum. This will usually cause a bulge you can see under your skin. Typically, hernias happen in the abdomen or groin, but they can also occur in the thigh or genitals.
- CT (computed tomography) scan to produce multiple images inside the body to check for blockage of the intestines.

**How is a hernia repaired?**

Surgery is often the recommended treatment. Your doctor will refer you to a general surgeon to exam you and determine the type and size of your hernia. What that exam reveals will determine your surgical options—open repair, minimally invasive, or robotic surgery.

During hernia repair, the surgeon will either suture the opening in the muscle or tissue or insert a mesh material to close the opening. The mesh is a permanent material that supports and strengthens the weakened area where the hernia formed.

If possible, the surgeon will perform minimally invasive surgery through several small incisions, rather than one large incision. Innovative robotic system is a surgical option that allows for greater precision using small incisions.

**Surgical treatment options**

Several surgical options are available for hernia repair. They include:

- **Open repair**: Utilizing traditional surgical incisions, the surgeon reaches the hernia, through a larger incision replaces protruding tissue and sews up torn muscle or tissue. A synthetic mesh may be added to support the area and prevent a reoccurrence of the hernia.

- **Laparoscopic repair**: This approach utilizes only a few small incisions. A tiny camera is placed through one incision to guide the surgeon. Small instruments are inserted through another incision to repair the hernia. Laparoscopic surgery generally offers a faster recovery time than open repair but may not be appropriate for all conditions or patients.

- **Robotic surgery repair**: Robotic-assisted hernia repair is a minimally invasive surgical option that is performed through small incisions. The surgery allows for a lower rate of recurrence, less pain and faster recovery.

If a hernia goes untreated, potential complications may include:

- Increase in size and become more painful.
- A portion of the intestine becoming trapped in the abdominal wall, causing a bowel obstruction. This can cause severe pain, nausea or constipation.
- Blood supply to the intestine being compromised, and increase the risk for perforation, which can be life-threatening and require emergency surgery.
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