Health Tips: Cholecystectomy - Gall Bladder Removal Surgery

What is a cholecystectomy?

A cholecystectomy (pronounced “co-lee-sist-eck-toe-mee”) is the surgical removal of the gallbladder. This type of surgery is done when the gall bladder becomes infected or inflamed or to remove gallstones. The gallbladder collects and stores a digestive fluid called bile. When bile becomes blocked by gallstones or inflammation, pain can occur and the gallbladder must be removed.

How to prepare for the procedure

The surgeon should be made aware of all medical problems and current medications a person is taking, especially blood thinners such as Plavix, Coumadin (warfarin), Pradaxa, or aspirin. The surgeon may ask a person to “clean out” their colon and intestines prior to surgery. Also, eating may not be allowed the night before the surgery.

What to expect

Prior to surgery, an intravenous (IV) line will be placed to provide fluids and medications. A tube may be placed down the throat to help with breathing during the operation. Following the procedure, the person will be moved into a recovery room for observation. There are two ways that surgeons can remove the gallbladder.

1. In a laparoscopic cholecystectomy the surgeon makes 4 small incisions into the abdomen. Gas is used to inflate the abdomen to allow the surgeon to see the gallbladder more clearly. A small camera called a laparoscope is then inserted into the abdomen to guide the surgeon’s tools in removing the gallbladder. The gas then leaves through the incisions and the site is closed using stitches, staples, or glue-like bandages. The procedure lasts about 1-2 hours.

2. In an open cholecystectomy the surgeon makes a 6 inch incision in the upper right side of the abdomen and cuts through the fat and muscle to remove the gallbladder. A small drain may be placed in the abdomen but is usually removed in the hospital. The site is then stapled or stitched closed. The procedure lasts about 1-2 hours.

What are the risks?

The surgeon will do everything to minimize risks, however like all operations, a cholecystectomy has risks.

Some possible risks of a cholecystectomy are:

- Infection
- Injury to the common bile duct
- Bile leakage
- Retained gallstone in the common bile duct
- Kidney or urinary problems
- Blood clots
- Premature labor
- Fetal loss
- Intestinal injury
What happens after the procedure?

People tend to remain in the hospital for 2-6 days following gallbladder removal. While in the hospital a person may be asked to:

- Breathe into a device that helps their lung function so that they do not get pneumonia
- Sit up in bed and walk around periodically with help from a nurse
- Begin drinking liquids and eating food after removal of the IV tube
- Wear pressure stockings in order to prevent blood clots in their legs and keep their blood circulating well

The doctor may prescribe medication to help control pain after surgery.

Some ways to reduce the risks after surgery are:

- Do not lift heavy objects or participate in strenuous activity for 3-5 days for laparoscopic or 10-14 days for open procedures
- Wash hands before and after touching near the incision site
- Follow instructions on when to change bandages
- Increase dietary fiber if constipated

When to contact the surgeon?

The surgeon should be contacted if any of the following symptoms occur:

- Pain that will not go away
- Pain that gets worse
- A fever of more than 101°F
- Vomiting
- Swelling, redness, bleeding, or bad-smelling drainage from the wound site
- Strong abdominal pain
- Jaundice or yellow skin
- No bowel movement or unable to pass gas for 3 days
- Watery diarrhea lasting longer than 3 days