What is an inguinal or femoral hernia?

An inguinal or femoral hernia is a condition in which a part of the intra-abdominal fat or small intestine bulges through a weak area in the lower abdominal muscles or groin.

It is called an **inguinal** hernia when the fat or part of the intestine slides through a weak area at the inguinal ring, the opening to the inguinal canal. A **femoral** hernia is when the fat or intestine slides through a weak area at the femoral canal, located just below the inguinal canal.

Both types are located in the upper part of the thigh near the groin.

What causes an inguinal or femoral hernia?

Most of the time, there is no clear cause of a femoral hernia. Some may be present at birth but aren’t noticed until later in life. Femoral hernias tend to occur more often in women rather than men.

A woman may get a hernia while she is pregnant because of the pressure on her belly wall.

The cause of an inguinal hernia depends on the type of inguinal hernia present.

- **Indirect** inguinal hernias are present at birth and are much more common in men rather than women. This is mainly due to the way males develop in the womb. In this instance, the inguinal ring does not close as it should after birth, leaving a weakness in the abdominal wall. Indirect hernias are the most common type of inguinal hernia.

- **Direct** inguinal hernias are caused by weakening and aging of connective tissue in the abdominal muscles. This type of hernia occurs only in males.

Direct hernias develop gradually because of continuous stress on the muscles such as:

- Sudden twists, pulls, or muscle strains
- Lifting heavy objects
- Straining on the toilet because of constipation
- Being overweight
- Chronic coughing

What are the symptoms?

Some femoral hernias cause no symptoms. However, a person may experience the following symptoms with femoral or inguinal hernias:

- a small bulge in one or both sides of the groin that may increase in size and disappear when lying down; in males, it can present as a swollen or enlarged scrotum
- discomfort or sharp pain—especially when straining, lifting, or exercising—that improves when resting
- a feeling of weakness, heaviness, or pressure in the groin
- a burning, gurgling or aching feeling at the bulge

How do people know if they have an inguinal or femoral hernia?

A person’s doctor will conduct a physical examination as well as take a thorough medical history. They may be asked to stand and cough so the doctor can feel the hernia as it moves into the groin or scrotum. The doctor may also order an ultrasound or CT scan to confirm the diagnosis.
How to treat an inguinal or femoral hernia

In some cases, the hernia may be gently massaged back into its proper position in the abdomen by a person's doctor.

When a hernia becomes stuck in the groin or scrotum and cannot be massaged back into the abdomen it is called an incarcerated hernia. This is caused by swelling and may lead to a more serious condition called a strangulated hernia. A strangulated hernia requires immediate medical attention as the blood supply to the bulging intestine is jeopardized.

Symptoms of a strangulated hernia include:
• extreme tenderness and redness in the area of the bulge
• sudden pain that worsens in a short period of time
• fever
• rapid heart rate
• nausea and vomiting

Surgery is the only option for incarcerated and strangulated hernias. The procedure is usually done on an outpatient basis and the recovery time depends on the size of the hernia, technique used, and the age and health of the patient.

When to contact the doctor

A person's doctor should be contacted if they have any of the following symptoms:
• A bulge in the upper thigh next to the groin
• A painful hernia that cannot be pushed back into the abdomen using gentle pressure
• A painful hernia along with nausea, vomiting, or abdominal pain
• A hernia that is red, purple, dark, or discolored

Sources of additional information

National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse
2 Information Way
Bethesda, MD 20892-3570

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