What Is Appendicitis?

Your side may hurt so much that you called your doctor. Or maybe you went straight to the hospital emergency room. If the symptoms came on quickly, you may have **appendicitis**. This is an infection of the appendix. Surgery can stop the infection. Read on to learn more about what to expect.

**Pain and Other Symptoms**

Appendicitis can happen to anyone. Symptoms tend to appear quickly, often over a day or two. Symptoms can include:

- Pain that starts in the center of your belly and moves to your lower right side
- Increased pain and pressure on your side when you walk
- Vomiting, nausea, or decreased appetite
- Fever or fatigue
- Diarrhea or constipation

Severe pain may make it hard to stand up straight.

**How Surgery Helps**

Medication can’t cure appendicitis. But an **appendectomy** (surgery to remove an infected appendix) can. This is a very common procedure. Removing the appendix should not affect your long-term health. It’s best to remove the appendix before it bursts. If an infected or burst appendix is not removed, it can cause severe health problems.
Your Appendix

The appendix is a hollow structure about the size of your little finger. It opens off the colon (large bowel). The purpose of the appendix is unclear. But if it is blocked, it may become infected.

A Normal Appendix

The small intestine brings liquid waste to the colon and appendix. This waste can easily pass in and out of a normal appendix.

When Problems Occur

Inflammation

An appendix may become inflamed (swollen) or blocked by a hard piece of stool. Then liquid waste cannot pass in and out of the appendix. As a result, the appendix may become infected.

Perforation

An infected appendix may perforate (burst) and leak infected material. This may cause further infection (an abscess or peritonitis) in your abdomen (belly).
Your Medical Evaluation

Severe belly pain that settles in your right side is often a sign of appendicitis. But to be certain of the diagnosis, your doctor will do a physical exam. Tests may also be ordered. In some cases, you may be sent home and asked to return the next day.

Where Does It Hurt?

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms. The center of your abdomen may be painful. Or the pain may have moved to your lower right side. To help locate the cause of pain, your doctor may:

- Feel your abdomen, and move your right leg
- Perform a rectal or pelvic exam
- Order a blood test, urine test, x-ray, ultrasound, CT scan, or barium enema

You May Be Sent Home

The cause of your illness may be unclear even after an exam. You may be sent home and asked to return the next day. Your symptoms may then be easier to diagnose. If you are sent home, ask what to eat or drink while you wait. Avoid antibiotics and pain medications. Be sure to follow up in 24 hours.

Call or go to the emergency room right away if:

- Your temperature keeps rising
- Pain or tenderness worsens
- Your overall condition worsens
If You Have Surgery

After your evaluation, your doctor may decide that you have appendicitis. If so, surgery is needed. You will be sent to a hospital room. Or you may be taken right to an operating room. There you will be prepared for surgery.

Your Experience

You may receive fluids and antibiotics through an IV (intravenous) line. Tell your doctor if you are allergic to any antibiotics. Before surgery, an anesthesiologist or nurse anesthetist will also talk to you. He or she will give you general anesthesia just before your appendectomy. This keeps you pain-free and allows you to sleep during the surgery.

Risks and Complications

Appendectomy is usually a safe surgery. However, all surgeries have some risks. Risks and complications can include:

- Infection or bleeding from the incision site
- Infection or swelling in the abdomen, or leakage of bowel material
- Bowel ileus (slowness of bowel muscles) or bowel blockage
- Problems from anesthesia
During Surgery

The goal of surgery is to remove the appendix safely. In most cases, the surgery lasts from 30 minutes to an hour. If your appendix has burst, surgery may take longer.

Reaching the Appendix

One of two techniques may be used to reach the appendix. Your surgeon will discuss which is best for you.

• **Open surgery:** One incision (about 2 to 3 inches long) is made in your lower right side. A bigger incision may be used if the appendix has perforated.

• **Laparoscopic surgery:** From 2 to 4 small incisions are used. One is near your bellybutton. The others are elsewhere on your abdomen. A laparoscope, a thin tube with a camera attached, is inserted through one incision. The camera shows the inside of your abdomen on a monitor. This image helps guide the surgery. Surgical tools are inserted in the other incisions.

Removing the Appendix

Once the appendix is reached, blood vessels and the colon’s link to the appendix are sealed off. Then the appendix is removed.

Finishing the Surgery

In most cases, the entire incision is closed with stitches or staples. Your surgeon may place a temporary drain in the wound or in the abdomen. This helps cure or prevent infection. If your appendix perforated, the outer layers of the incision may be left open. This lets the incision drain more easily. It may heal on its own, or be closed about 5 days later.
Recovery

Most patients recover quickly after appendectomy. You will likely be in the hospital for 1 to 2 days. If your appendix burst you may stay longer. After you return home, plan on a follow-up visit to the doctor in 1 to 2 weeks.

In the Hospital

In most cases, you will drink liquids and walk on the day of the surgery. You will also receive pain medication. To help keep your lungs clear, you may be taught breathing exercises.

Back at Home

To help control pain from surgery, take your medications as directed. Avoid strenuous activity, heavy lifting, and driving until your surgeon says it is okay. As instructed, slowly resume your normal activities in 7 to 10 days.

When to Call Your Doctor

Call your doctor if you notice any of the following:

- Swelling, oozing, worsening pain, or unusual redness around the incision
- Fever (over 101°F)
- Worsening abdominal pain
- Severe diarrhea, bloating, or constipation
- Nausea or vomiting
Back in Action

You can have a healthy life without your appendix. In fact, you’re likely to recover quickly from an appendectomy. Before long, you can return to normal life and all the things you enjoy.