

Hernias – what they are and how to detect and prevent them

Hernias are dangerous, but they can be treated or prevented by taking the correct action. This article explains how to identify, treat and prevent hernias.



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What is a hernia?

Many structures of the body (including the brain) are vulnerable to herniation, although hernia most often refers to bulges in the lower torso involving the abdominal wall.

Hernias occur when the contents of a body cavity bulge outward from their normal location. Such contents may include portions of intestine or abdominal fatty tissue enclosed in a membranous lining.

While hernias are often relatively harmless, they carry risk of complication, particularly should the blood supply to the contents of the hernial sac be cut off – a so-called strangulated hernia.

What causes a hernia?

Conditions that increase the pressure of the abdominal cavity may contribute to producing a hernia (or worsening an existing hernia). Some of these include:

- obesity
- heavy lifting or any other intense straining of the abdomen
- coughing, particularly chronic (as with smokers)
- straining during a bowel movement or urination
- chronic lung disease
- pregnancy
- fluid in the abdominal cavity
- family history of hernias.

Signs and symptoms

A swollen protrusion of tissue, particularly one causing pain, may indicate a strangulated hernia, a serious condition requiring immediate medical care.

General signs and symptoms of hernia include:

- a lump in the groin or other abdominal region sometimes preceded by aching or pain
- pain increasing during coughing
- bowel obstruction, nausea and vomiting
- reddish, tender area of the abdomen
- burning sensation in the abdominal or scrotal region
- increased pain from long periods of standing up.

While some hernias resolve themselves, surgery is often required to repair the hernia.



Hernia is a general term referring to a condition that can appear in various parts of the body. The most common hernias develop somewhere in the abdomen. They are caused by a weakness in the abdominal wall, which allows a hole to develop.

Treatment

It is important to treat hernias, since they can worsen to more serious and even life-threatening medical conditions when left untreated.

Hernia surgery involves an incision at the hernial site after which the surgeon will either move the protruding contents of the hernia back into the abdominal cavity or remove the contents altogether. The latter option may be used in cases where the intestines are strangulated. Following repair, the weakened tissue that contributed to the development of the hernia will be closed and reinforced with stitching or (in the case of larger hernias) synthetic mesh.

Light activities can often be resumed within days of hospital release, but strenuous activity must be strictly avoided until healing is complete. In most cases, this requires six to eight weeks.

Prevention

Lifestyle modifications, such as exercise, diet and maintaining a constant healthy weight, can help prevent hernia formation.

Toned muscles

Since hernias form where the muscle tissues are weak, toning organ-supporting muscles, such as the abdominal muscles, can help prevent hernias.

Fibre-rich diet

Diets high in fibre-rich foods can help prevent abdominal hernias by alleviating constipation, which is one of the causes of increased internal body pressure. These include beans, lentils, vegetables, and whole grain and bran products such as cereals.

Constant, healthy weight

Maintaining a healthy body weight and BMI avoids obesity, which is one of the culprits in hernia formation. Since frequent and drastic weight fluctuations also lead to weakened muscle tissues, it is also advisable to keep a constant weight as a preventative measure. Exercise and a good diet can help maintain a constant, healthy weight.

Avoiding or managing the effects of heavy lifting

Individuals whose jobs require constant heavy lifting (or who are involved in recreational weightlifting) should consult a doctor on preventative measures to decrease the risk of hernias, since these people are constantly at risk for elevated internal pressure build-up and muscle tissue strains.

Some practical advice for prevention:

- **Warm up properly before athletic activity and exercise.**
 - **Strengthen abdominal muscles with strength exercises.**
 - **Rest properly after vigorous exercise, particularly lifting.**
 - **Quit smoking, as coughing can contribute to hernia development.**
 - **Eat a high-fibre diet to avoid constipation.**
 - **Maintain a healthy weight.**
 - **Incorporate some stretching and flexibility exercises into your exercise routine.**
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