What is a gallbladder?

The gallbladder is a small organ that stores bile that is made by the liver. When bile is needed to help digest foods, the gallbladder squeezes it down into the intestines.

Who needs their gallbladder removed?

In some people, the gallbladder forms stones but just because there are stones does not mean the gallbladder needs to be removed. If the stones cause pain or if they leave the gallbladder and affect surrounding organs, then we recommend removal of the gallbladder.

How do you remove the gallbladder?

Removal of the gallbladder (or “cholecystectomy”) is typically done with four small incisions and with use of a camera (also known as “laparoscopic”). It is able to be done this way most of the time. Occasionally we need to make a larger incision to remove the gallbladder. This is more likely if the gallbladder is very inflamed or if you have had previous surgery in your upper abdomen. Sometimes we inject a dye that we can see on x-ray into the tubes connecting the gallbladder to evaluate the anatomy in the area. This is called an intraoperative cholangiogram. The surgery usually takes about an hour.

What are the risks of the surgery?

Every surgery has risks of bleeding, infection, and damage to surrounding structures. These risks are all relatively low. The structures around the gallbladder include surrounding bowel and the common bile duct, which is the tube that empties all of the bile from the liver and the gallbladder into the intestines. This happens less than 1% of the time but requires an additional surgery at a large hospital. A leak of bile into the abdominal cavity is also a risk. It is also a low risk and would feel like increasing (rather than decreasing) abdominal pain in the area of your gallbladder after surgery.

How long is recovery?

If you are coming in from home to have your surgery, you can typically go home the same day. If you were admitted to the hospital, you may need to stay for 1-2 days depending on the presence of any other medical issues.

At home you can expect to need to take the first week easy and you will likely still feel effects of the surgery for the first month, such as slight pain around your incisions, a decreased appetite, and some decreased energy. Everyone is a little different on how long they feel these effects but most people start doing their normal routines with some modifications 2-5 days after surgery. It is ok if it takes longer for you.

If you need an “open” procedure where we need to make a larger incision, your recovery will be a little longer and may require a night in the hospital to manage your pain.
What pain can I expect after surgery and how do I manage it?
What medicines should I take?

You will likely experience some pain around your incisions, below your right ribs where your gallbladder is removed, and some right shoulder and back pain for 2-3 days. It is normal to feel sore around your incisions and abdomen for longer than this and everyone’s body takes a slightly different amount of time to recover.

To manage the pain, unless instructed otherwise, take 1000 mg (2 tabs extra strength) of Tylenol/acetaminophen every 6 hours around the clock for the first 2-3 days. Do not exceed 4000 mg of acetaminophen in one day as this can be harmful to your liver. You can also take 600 mg (3 tabs) of ibuprofen/Advil/Motrin every 6 hours with some food. Use ice packs and hot packs to help with the pain as well. Double check with your surgeon if you have issues with your liver or kidneys.

If the above medications are not enough, take the narcotic medicine (Oxycodone or alternative) as prescribed. You will receive this prescription when you leave the hospital. Be careful if your narcotic medication is a combination pill that has acetaminophen/Tylenol in it such as Percocet. See above.

If you take more than a day of the narcotic medication, make sure that you take an over-the-counter stool softener such as Miralax 1-2 times per day or Colace 100 mg 1-2 times per day to keep from becoming constipated from the narcotic pain pills.

What activity can I do after surgery?

You should try to avoid lifting heavy objects (greater than 20 lbs) for the first 2 weeks. After this time frame you can start to lift more. There is no strict time frame but try to listen to your body. If you start to lift something and it hurts – stop! If your job requires heavy lifting, talk to our office or your surgeon about a work excuse note.

Can I drive after the surgery?

You can drive when you are off narcotic pain medications (such as Oxycodone, Percocet, Norco, Tylenol #3) and when you feel you can twist and turn as you would need to in an emergency situation. Typically people wait 2-3 days but it may take longer.

When can I go back to work after surgery?

It depends what kind of work you do. If you have a desk job, most people feel ready to go back after about 5-7 days. If your job requires heavy lifting and you cannot go back on “light duty” then talk to your surgeon. We can provide work notes as needed.

How do I care for my incisions? Can I shower? Can I take off my bandages?

If you have bandages over your incision, you can take them off the day after surgery. There are typically white stickers under these called “Steri-strips.” These fall off on their own. You can shower with them on but don’t scrub them and pat them dry.

If you have skin glue over your incisions, you do not need to take anything off and everyone can shower the day after surgery. Don’t swim or take a bath for 2 weeks after surgery.

What should I eat after surgery?

You may not feel hungry all the time or you may eat a small amount and feel full. This is ok. Some people find eating multiple small meals is easier than 3 large meals. Continue to drink lots of clear fluids.
You may notice some diarrhea for the first 1-2 weeks after surgery, especially with fatty foods and raw fruits and vegetables but this usually resolves with time. If you are trying these foods for the first time after surgery, you may want to try eating them while you are at home. If you are continuing to have these symptoms at the time of your follow up appointment, make sure to let your surgeon know as there are medications that can be prescribed to help.

What should I look out for after surgery?

- Fever of 101.5°F or higher
- Leg swelling
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Dizziness/lightheadedness/fainting
- Redness expanding around your incisions or pus draining from your incisions (some clear yellow/red drainage can be normal)
- Yellowing of your eyes or skin, darkening of your urine to a brown, and lightening of your stool to a chalky color
- Increasing pain around where your gallbladder was

When should I call for help?

Who should I call?

If you notice any of the above symptoms, call the number listed on this form. If it is after hours you can ask to speak to the surgeon on-call. If it is a more minor issue, you can call and talk to one of the nurses during business hours the next day. However, if you have sudden severe chest pain, shortness of breath, or are feeling increasingly sick or lightheaded, you should call 911 and be taken to the emergency room right away.