

Inguinal hernia (adults)

Your treatment options. Your second opinion.



What is inguinal hernia

Your groin can be affected by a condition called inguinal hernia that develops when a defect or hole forms in a naturally weak point of the muscles of your lower abdomen, which may allow internal contents such as fatty tissues or an intestine to push through.

Some inguinal hernias don't cause symptoms. Often, however, a lump in the groin can appear, which is more obvious when you cough or lift a heavy object, as well as symptoms such as dull pain or discomfort.

The lump may gradually become larger. Complications may also occur and, infrequently, fatty tissues or an intestine can suddenly become trapped (incarcerated hernia). It is very rare but an incarcerated hernia may become strangulated, which is life-threatening and requires emergency surgery. Such complications occur in less than 1% of people.

Inguinal hernias are nine times more likely in adult men. They also may occur in early infancy due to the compression of the blood supply of the bowel. The cause of hernias is either congenital (you are born with a defect) or degenerative (the ageing process) in nature.

Treatment for inguinal hernia

Generally the two main options for treatment include:

- > Watchful waiting
- > Surgery

Wearing a truss (support) to stop the lump coming out was used in the past, but is now thought to have limited or no benefit and should not be recommended.

Watchful waiting

Watchful waiting for inguinal hernia involves not receiving treatment, but following your doctor's instructions to monitor your condition and if you notice new or worsening symptoms, going back to your doctor for a re-assessment or seeking immediate medical help if symptoms are severe.

One advantage of watchful waiting is enabling you to avoid the risk of complications due to surgery. Watchful waiting may be an option if you don't experience symptoms or your symptoms are mild and don't excessively bother you, or if you have health problems that increase the risks of surgery.

Surgery

If an inguinal hernia is causing symptoms that excessively bother you or it has become larger or developed a complication, surgery to repair the defect may be suggested to you.

However, even if you don't have symptoms or symptoms don't excessively bother you, surgery may also be suggested. The reasoning is that the defect is likely to get larger over time and it's better to have surgery to prevent the hernia getting worse, in particular to avoid it becoming strangulated.

Two types of surgery are usually performed for inguinal hernias. Open surgery involves an incision (cut) in your groin, pushing the fatty tissues and intestine back into your abdomen and sewing together the weak or torn muscle, often reinforced with synthetic mesh.

Laparoscopy is 'minimally invasive' surgery that uses keyhole surgery and tiny instruments to perform the repair. Compared to open surgery, laparoscopy may cause less pain and enable a quicker return to normal activities, however a hernia may be more likely to come back again.

Watchful waiting and when to seek medical help

Watchful waiting for inguinal hernia involves not receiving treatment for now, but knowing what to do if you notice new or worsening symptoms.

- > See your doctor if symptoms bother you excessively such as:
 - > Larger lump
 - > Burning, gurgling or aching sensation at the lump
 - > Pain, discomfort or heavy/dragging sensation at the lump
 - > An increase in pain
- > Get immediate medical help for complication such as:
 - > Incarcerated hernia, where internal contents become trapped and obstruct the intestine, leading to severe pain, nausea, vomiting and unable to have a bowel movement or pass gas.
 - > Strangulated hernia, where an incarcerated hernia cuts off blood flow to part of your intestine. This is life-threatening and requires emergency surgery.

Always consult a medical expert before commencing a course of treatment for any medical condition.





Surgery and medical research

When evaluating you for surgery or other options for inguinal hernia, your treating medical specialist will take into account many complex factors, including the latest medical research.

Studies have found that surgery performed on people with an inguinal hernia who don't have symptoms may be no more effective than watchful waiting for preventing pain, health problems and complications.

However, studies have also found that the chances of symptoms getting worse and the need for surgery does only slowly increase every year in people who choose to do watchful waiting, which may be of particular relevance for younger people.

Surgery and risks

While complications following surgery are not common, they do occur including short term painful swelling, bruising of the testicles and penis, surgical site infection, blood build up in the space left by the hernia, long term pain and the hernia coming back again.

Understanding these risks is important, particularly given the possibility that surgery may be no more effective than watchful waiting for preventing pain, health problems and complications in people who don't have symptoms.

Surgery and inguinal hernia – the main points

- > If your inguinal hernia is causing symptoms that excessively bother you or complications (except for strangulated hernia, which is an emergency), surgery may be suggested to you to repair the defect.

- > If you don't have symptoms or symptoms are mild and surgery is suggested to you to prevent your inguinal hernia getting worse, take into account the medical studies showing that surgery may be no more effective than watchful waiting for preventing pain, health problems and complications such as incarcerated and strangulated hernias.
- > If you don't have symptoms or symptoms are mild and you're considering watchful waiting, also take into account that studies have found that the chances of an inguinal hernia getting worse and the need for surgery slowly increases every year in people who choose to do watchful waiting.

Would you like a second opinion?

Deciding on a treatment path for a medical condition can be a difficult, complex and stressful question.

Would you like the benefit of an expert second opinion to help you to decide on your treatment options?

If you want to know more about GPS² or have a general enquiry, please contact us on 1800 477 246 or email via contact@gps2.com.au

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