

Appendicitis - Paediatric

Consumer Health Information

This information sheet aims to answer any questions you may have about your child having appendicitis.

What is Appendicitis?

Appendicitis is inflammation of the appendix. The appendix is a small part of the bowel that is connected to the bottom right-hand side of the large intestine.

Appendicitis is caused by a blockage or infection of the appendix.

The appendix has no use to the proper workings of the bowel, and this is the reason why a person can live a healthy life without their appendix.

Complicated appendicitis - means that your child's appendix was inflamed, gangrenous or had "popped" (perforated) and they have had a surgical operation in order to remove their appendix. There are varying levels of "complicated appendicitis" and depending on the severity will be treated accordingly (see below for further details).

Simple appendicitis - means that your child's appendix has not "popped" (perforated) and was relatively mild.

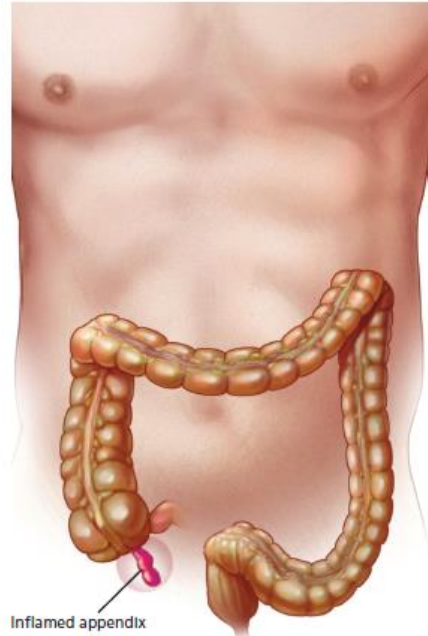
What are the warning signs/symptoms of appendicitis?

Pain is the most common symptom of appendicitis. It often starts near the navel, or belly button, and might come and go for a while. It then usually moves low down to the right in the abdomen (tummy) and becomes more severe and more constant. It usually hurts to walk or cough.

Other common signs and symptoms of appendicitis are:

- fever (high temperature)
- an abdomen which is tender to touch, especially low on the right
- nausea (feeling like throwing up)
- loss of appetite (not feeling like eating)
- vomiting, although usually only once or twice
- diarrhoea or constipation

Young children can find it hard to say where the pain is, and all you may know is that they are sick. If it is appendicitis, usually the pain will only be in the right side of the stomach. Unlike gastro, vomiting or diarrhoea are usually mild with appendicitis.



How is appendicitis diagnosed?

The main way a doctor diagnoses appendicitis is by talking about what has happened and examining the person with the pain.

The doctor will ask for a history of your child's symptoms and illness. They will examine your child by checking the site of the pain and pressing on the abdomen.

Sometimes it can be difficult to work out the exact cause of stomach pain as there are many possible reasons. If the doctor is not sure if it is appendicitis, they may keep your child in hospital and watch them to see if their symptoms get worse.

Tests will be performed to help work out what is going on, but these tests are not always helpful or reliable, they don't always give a definite answer.

Your child may need:

- an ultrasound or X-ray to take pictures of their abdomen.
- a blood test to look for signs of infection or inflammation.

In cases where children are sick and it is not clear why, your doctor may recommend an operation to check the appendix even if they are not certain it is inflamed.

A CT scan is a different type of scan sometimes used to help diagnose appendicitis, however in children a routine CT scan to diagnose appendicitis is not recommended due to the high exposure to radiation.

It can be hard to diagnose appendicitis, especially in a young child. Even in adults, it can be hard to tell the difference between appendicitis and conditions like ectopic pregnancies, bowel infections and bowel obstructions. The doctor may need to examine the person with the pain a number of times.

Since appendicitis is potentially life threatening if left untreated, doctors will err on the side of caution and operate, even if there is no firm diagnosis.

How is appendicitis treated?

Conservative management – After looking at all the results and clinical findings the doctors may choose to manage appendicitis in the first instance with intravenous antibiotics.

Simple appendicitis is an operation to remove the inflamed appendix, known as an appendectomy or appendicectomy.

The appendix is not essential for health, and the body functions normally without one.

There are 2 different ways to remove the appendix:

- Laparoscopic (or keyhole surgery) — through a tiny telescope. There will be 3 small keyhole cuts of about 1-2cm long each
- Rarely an open operation will need to be performed through a larger incision

Recovery time from surgery will vary depending on many factors, including the person's general health, the type of surgery, and whether the appendix has burst.

Most people recover without too many troubles.

Sometimes, the wound gets infected, and this will need follow up by a doctor.

Sometimes, the appendix is found to be normal, i.e., not inflamed, after it is removed, and this usually means there is another reason for the symptoms that are like appendicitis. Your doctor will discuss looking for another cause of the problem.

Complex appendicitis

Antibiotics might be used as well as removal of the appendix. Antibiotics may be used if:

- The surgery is delayed
- If you must travel a long way to have the operation, or
- If there are complicated factors such as an abscess/ collection or mass on the appendix

Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics before surgery to reduce the risk of infection.

After surgery, your doctor may recommend light activity for a few weeks until the surgical wound heals (please refer to Care at Home).

Can appendicitis be prevented?

There is no proven way to prevent appendicitis.

Wound Care

Most surgical wounds are glued back together and therefore the removal of stitches is often not required. A simple dressing is applied over the wounds to provide protection until they fully heal. It is advised to keep these dressings on for one week and then remove and treat like a normal cut.

The dressings can get wet in the shower and can be patted dry afterwards.

Care at home

When your child comes home from hospital, they should:

- Stay home from school for one week and avoid sports for two weeks, but these times will depend on how sick your child has been. Always ask your surgeon if you're not sure.
- Be able to eat and drink as normal.
- Be able to shower and bathe as normal.
- Be in minimal pain. You can give paracetamol or ibuprofen as directed, if your child is in pain. See our fact sheet [Pain relief for children](#).

Follow-up

There is a small risk of developing an infection or a bowel blockage after having a burst appendix. Contact your GP or take your child to the local emergency department if:

- Your child gets a persistent fever (above 38.5°C)
- The wound starts to look infected (e.g. it looks red and inflamed, has a discharge, or it becomes more painful)
- Your child has increasing pain that is not controlled by paracetamol or ibuprofen.

Key points to remember

- A diagnosis of appendicitis is important because a burst appendix can make a child very sick.
- An appendectomy is an operation to remove the appendix. The appendix is not useful to the body.
- Your child will be in hospital for one to three days depending on the severity of the appendix infection.
- Once you are home from hospital, contact your surgeon if you think your child is developing an infection.

Sources:

Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne (Appendicitis Factsheet),
Sydney Children's Hospital Network (Appendicitis Factsheet),
Choosing Wisely Australia (Choosing Wisely recommendations),
Cochrane Review (Appendectomy versus antibiotic treatment for acute appendicitis, 2011)

Learn more here about the development and quality assurance of Healthdirect content

For more information

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