Surgical Emergency Unit
Abdominal Pain
Information for Patients

Welcome to
The John Radcliffe Hospital

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD MEDICAL SCIENCE DIVISION
What is abdominal pain?

Abdominal pain usually refers to cramps or a dull ache in the abdomen. It is often caused by a minor stomach upset or bug and you recover quickly.

Severe abdominal pain is more serious. If it starts suddenly and unexpectedly, it should be viewed as a medical emergency, especially if the pain is concentrated in a particular area. Call your GP as soon as possible or go to your nearest hospital accident and emergency department if this is the case.

Cramps due to trapped wind

Stomach cramps are often due to trapped wind and bloating. This is an extremely common problem that is easily treated—your chemist will be able to recommend a product which can be bought over the counter to relieve it.

Sudden stomach cramps with diarrhoea

If you have suddenly developed stomach cramps and you also have diarrhoea, the cause is probably a tummy bug also known as gastroenteritis. This means you have a viral or bacterial infection of the stomach and bowel, which you will usually fight off after a few days without the need for prescribed medication. Severe stomach cramps and diarrhoea that make you feel very ill could be due to a more serious infection, such as food poisoning. This also usually gets better on its own without treatment.

If your stomach cramps and diarrhoea continue, you may have a long-term condition, such as irritable bowel syndrome.
Sudden, severe abdominal pain

If you have sudden, severe pain in a particular area of your abdomen, call your GP immediately or go to your nearest hospital accident and emergency department. It may be a sign of a serious illness that will rapidly get worse without treatment.

The most common causes of sudden, severe abdominal pain include:

- **A perforated peptic ulcer** – an ulcer that develops on the inside lining of your stomach or duodenum (small bowel).
- **Gallstones** – small stones that form in the gallbladder. Your gallbladder may need to be removed.
- **Appendicitis** – severe pain in the centre or right hand side of your lower abdomen. Your appendix will probably need to be removed.
- **Gastroenteritis** – an infection of the stomach and bowel. Most people get better without treatment after a few days.
- **Kidney stones** – small stones may be passed out in your urine, but larger stones may block the kidney tubes and you will need to go to hospital to have these broken up.
- **Diverticulitis** – an inflammation of small pouches in the large bowel.

Long-term or recurring abdominal pain

Adults who have repeated episodes of abdominal pain should see their GP.

Common causes of persistent abdominal pain in adults include:

- **Irritable bowel syndrome** – where the muscle in the bowel wall go into spasm; pain is often relieved when you go to the toilet.
- **A urinary tract infection** that keeps returning. You may notice that you need to urinate frequently and that it burns when you pass water.
• A long-term peptic ulcer – an ulcer that develops on the inside lining of your stomach or duodenum (small bowel).
• Constipation.
• Heart burn and acid reflux – stomach acid leaks from the stomach and up into the oesophagus (gullet).

**Prevention**

• Eat healthily and regularly. Eating irregularly and snatching meals here and there can cause problems with your digestive system.

• Stop smoking. Smoking can cause heartburn and acid reflux.

• Lose excess weight and exercise regularly. Being overweight can cause heartburn.

• Do not binge drink. This increases acid production in your stomach and can cause heartburn.

• Reduce stress. Anxiety and worry can worsen digestive conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome.