

## Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

# Appendicitis

**Having appendicitis can be painful and worrying. You'll almost certainly need an operation. But most people recover completely and don't have any problems afterwards.**

We've brought together the best and most up-to-date research about appendicitis to see what treatments work. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

## What is appendicitis?

If you have appendicitis, it means your appendix is inflamed or infected. Your appendix is a small tube of tissue in the lower right part of your bowels (intestines). Bits of food or fluid in your intestines can get stuck in your appendix and cause an infection.

## What are the symptoms?

The first sign is usually pain in your tummy (abdomen). After a few hours, the pain may travel to the right side of your lower abdomen. The pain may be worse if you move, and get a bit better if you draw your knees up. You probably won't feel like eating, and you might vomit. You may also have a slight temperature and have constipation or diarrhoea. Not everyone with appendicitis gets all these symptoms

It's very important to see a doctor urgently if you might have appendicitis. If you don't get treatment, your appendix can burst. This can cause a serious infection inside your body called peritonitis. A burst appendix is more common in babies, young children and older people. That's because appendicitis is harder for doctors to spot in children and older people.

## What treatments work?

### Surgery

If you have appendicitis, you'll normally need surgery to take out your appendix. A burst appendix is also treated with surgery.

There are two types of surgery for appendicitis. If you have **open surgery**, your surgeon takes out your appendix through one cut in the lower right part of your abdomen. Or there's **keyhole surgery**. That's where the surgeon makes several smaller cuts and does the operation through these with the help of a camera.

There's not a very big difference between the two kinds of operation. But people who have keyhole surgery are less likely to get an infection in their cuts. They also have less pain and go home from hospital sooner. But they're more likely to get an infection inside their body that causes a pocket of pus (an abscess). If this happens, you'll probably need a tube put into your abdomen to drain the pus.

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You'll have a general anaesthetic to make you sleep during surgery. After your operation, the surgeon will close the cut or cuts on your abdomen with stitches or clips. You'll have these taken out after a few days. You'll have a scar, but this may fade slowly over time.

You may have some pain after your operation. You'll be given painkillers to help with this. If your painkillers don't work, tell a doctor or nurse. They'll be able to give you different painkillers or a larger dose.

### Antibiotics after surgery

You'll be given **antibiotics** to prevent infections after surgery. Without antibiotics, about 15 in 100 people get an infection after appendix surgery. With antibiotics, this drops to 7 in 100 people.

Doctors give antibiotics as a drip (also called an intravenous infusion or IV). You may need to carry on having antibiotics for a few days after surgery.

If your appendix bursts, it can cause a serious infection. This is also treated with antibiotics.

Antibiotics can have side effects. You may get pain where the drip goes into your body (this will probably be the back of your hand). Some people get an allergic reaction, feel sick or get diarrhoea.

### Antibiotics on their own

Some people aren't healthy enough to have surgery for appendicitis. If you can't have an operation for some reason, your doctor will probably recommend antibiotics instead. Antibiotics help reduce the pain from appendicitis. You'll probably start off having antibiotics as a drip. You may switch to tablets when you're well enough to eat.

You may be well enough to leave hospital after a couple of days. You might need to go back in the next few months to have your appendix taken out.

## What will happen to me?

Most people recover very well after surgery for appendicitis. Your appendix doesn't do anything important, and you can live quite happily without it. You'll probably go home from hospital within a few days.

However, all operations have risks. It is possible for someone to die during surgery to remove their appendix. But the risk is very small. Less than 3 in 1,000 people die during the operation or soon afterwards. If someone's appendix bursts before surgery, the risk is slightly higher, but the vast majority of people still recover completely. About 17 in 1,000 people die if their appendix bursts before they have surgery.

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