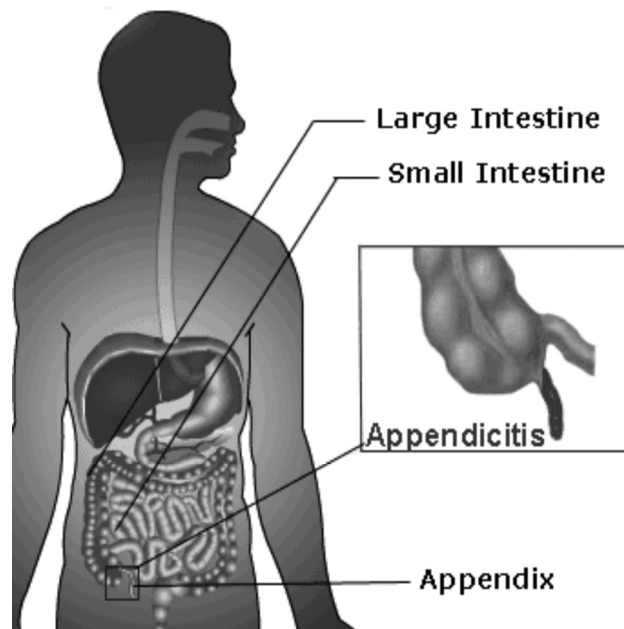


## What is the appendix?

The appendix is a little tube normally about 5-10 cm long that comes off the caecum. The caecum is the first part of the large bowel. The small intestine digests and absorbs food. The parts of the food that are not digested begin to be formed into faeces (motions) in the caecum. The appendix has no function in humans although in some animals it helps in digestion.

## What is appendicitis?



Appendicitis means inflammation of the appendix. The inflamed appendix becomes infected with bacteria from the intestine and gradually swells and fills with pus. The reason why the

appendix becomes inflamed in the first place is not known in most cases. Some cases are thought to be caused by blockage due to hard faeces. Eventually, if not treated, the swollen appendix might burst causing the contents of the intestine to spill into the abdominal cavity. This can cause a serious infection or an abscess in the abdomen. So, if appendicitis is suspected, early treatment is best before it bursts.

## Who gets appendicitis?

Appendicitis is common and can affect anyone of any age. Teenagers and young adults are the most commonly affected. About 6 in 100 people in the UK have appendicitis sometime in their life. It is much more common in western countries. This is thought to be partly due to the western diet, which is often low in fibre.

## What are the symptoms of appendicitis?

Pain in the abdomen is usually the main symptom. Commonly, the pain starts in the middle of the abdomen. The pain normally develops quickly and within few hours typically moves to the lower right hand side of the abdomen. This is over where the appendix normally lies. Typically the

pain becomes worse over 6-24 hours. The pain tends to be sharper if you cough or make any jarring movements.

Other symptoms that may occur include nausea, not feeling hungry, vomiting, generally feeling unwell and developing a fever. You may start to have diarrhoea pass urine more often.

If the appendix perforates (bursts) then you may experience a severe pain and would become very ill.

## How is appendicitis diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose appendicitis mainly according to your symptoms and on clinical examination of your abdomen. Sometimes it is difficult for doctors to be sure that appendicitis is the cause of the symptoms.

Some people develop pain that is similar to appendicitis, but which is caused by other conditions. For example, pelvic inflammatory disease or a urine infection. Urine and blood tests help to exclude other conditions.

There is no easy and foolproof test to confirm appendicitis. A surgeon often

has to make a judgement whether to operate or not. It depends on whether the symptoms suggest that appendicitis is the probable diagnosis. Sometimes a surgeon advises to 'wait and see'. This allows some time to see if symptoms progress to a more definite diagnosis, or if they change or go away. Sometimes tests are used if there is doubt about the diagnosis. For example, an ultrasound scan or a CT scan may help to clarify the cause of the symptoms in some people. But as there is no 100% guaranteed test for appendicitis occasionally a patient who seems to have appendicitis may have to undergo surgery to have their appendix removed, which might later be found to be normal.

## What is the treatment for appendicitis?

Once the diagnosis of appendicitis is made you will be admitted to hospital. Treatment is usually an operation to remove the appendix. This is done under general anaesthetic and may be done either using a cut on the right side of your abdomen or by keyhole surgery.

Removal of the appendix is one of the most commonly performed operations in the UK. This is usually a straightforward and successful

operation needing just a short recovery. However, surgery can be more difficult and you will take longer to recover if the appendix has burst. You will be given antibiotics before the operation and if the appendix is very inflamed or has burst, these will be continued afterwards.

There are usually no long-term complications after the operation. As with any operation there is a small risk of complications from the operation itself and from the anaesthetic. However, if you don't have an operation, an inflamed appendix is likely to perforate and cause a serious infection in the abdomen (peritonitis), which can be life threatening.

There is a small risk of infection or bruising in the wound inside the abdomen after the surgery. If your wound becomes swollen, increasingly painful or if you develop fever you should contact the hospital urgently. If you have an infection this sometimes mean that you need more antibiotics. Occasionally the infection may have to be drained using a tube or with another operation.



## Appendicitis

### Patient information