



Education

Common Duct Stones

What are common duct stones?

Common duct stones are stones in the common bile duct. The common bile duct carries bile from the liver and gallbladder to the small intestine. Bile helps digest fats. The stones form from bile.

How do they occur?

Most gallstones and duct stones are made of cholesterol in the bile. Usually acids in bile keep cholesterol from forming into stones. If the amount of cholesterol in the bile increases beyond the ability of acids to maintain a balance, the cholesterol crystallizes and forms a stone. Some common duct stones result from infection in the bile duct or liver.

The gallbladder is a pear-shaped organ that lies underneath the liver on your right side. The gallbladder stores bile produced by the liver. Stones usually form in the gallbladder, but they may form in the common bile duct. When stones form in the common bile duct, the condition is called choledocholithiasis. Also, gallstones may move from the gallbladder into the common bile duct and become lodged in the duct.

Pressure from stones blocking the duct makes it hard for the liver and gallbladder to function. As a result, if you have stones you may have sudden pain on the right side of your abdomen.

Gallstones occur more often in people who have high cholesterol levels or diabetes.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of common duct stones include:

- severe attacks of pain in the upper right part of the abdomen, which can last for hours
- jaundice, which is a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes caused by too much bile pigment (bilirubin) in the blood
- chills and fever
- nausea and vomiting.

How are they diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and do a physical exam.

He or she may order lab tests to look for signs of bile duct blockage. In addition, these tests may be performed:

- ultrasound, CT (computerized tomography) scans, or HIDA scans to show dilated ducts
- cholangiography, which is an exam of the bile ducts with x-rays
- endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP), which is an exam with an endoscope, a slim, lighted tube that can be passed through the stomach and into the small intestine.

How are they treated?

Possible treatments include medicine, endoscopy, or surgery.

A nonsurgical way to treat common duct stones is with a drug called chenodiol. This drug can dissolve existing common duct stones, but stones may come back after a few years. Also, chenodiol has been associated with liver problems.

ERCP (endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography) is another way to treat common duct stones. The endoscope can be used to find the stones and, if possible, remove them through the tube.

The stones may be surgically removed. During the operation a sample of your bile will be checked for infection in the biliary tract. If you have an infection, you may be given an antibiotic after the operation.

The surgeon will examine the common bile duct to be sure that all stones are removed. If there is any question of stones still in the duct, the surgeon will place a T-tube in the common duct. A T-tube is a catheter used to explore and flush the common duct. A cholangiogram can be taken through the T-tube 7 or 8 days after surgery. If you have a T-tube and some stones are found, a radiologist can remove the stones. If no stones appear on the cholangiogram and fluids are flowing properly, the T-tube may be clamped overnight and removed the next day. However, your surgeon may decide to keep the T-tube in longer.

You and your health care provider will decide when to schedule follow-up visits based on your symptoms and your general health.

How long will the effects last?

The effects of this condition will last as long as the stones remain in the bile duct and cause problems in the liver and gallbladder.

How can I take care of myself?

- If your temperature is over 100°F (37.8°C), rest as much as you can. After your temperature falls below 100°F (37.8°C), moderate activity is OK. Ask your health care provider if you can take aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen to control your fever. Keep a daily record of your temperature.
- If you are chilled, stay warm but do not cover up so much that you sweat.
- If you have had surgery, limit strenuous activity according to your provider's instructions.
- If your symptoms continue or if you develop new symptoms, tell your provider.

How can I help prevent common duct stones?

You can help prevent getting more common duct stones by following your prescribed treatment. In addition, you can:

- Maintain good eating habits, such as:
 - eating a healthy diet that includes whole grains, fresh fruits, and vegetables
 - decreasing the amount of fat, especially animal fat (meat and dairy) that you eat.
- Exercise regularly, according to your provider's recommendation.

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