

GENERAL SURGERY

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Could that pain in your stomach be an intestinal obstruction?

Welcome to the June newsletter, as a general surgeon, I am committed to empowering patients with knowledge to navigate their healthcare journeys confidently. This month, we look at intestinal obstruction.

What is intestinal obstruction?

An intestinal obstruction is a blockage that prevents food, fluids and gas from passing through the intestines. It can occur in either the small intestine or the large intestine, and the consequences of delaying treatment can be fatal.

An obstruction happens when something blocks your intestines. It can be caused by hernias, tumours, scar tissue or even swallowed objects. Left untreated, it can lead to bowel death or a life-threatening infection. If you have ever experienced severe abdominal pain, nausea or unexplained bloating, you may have brushed it off as food poisoning or gas. But what if your body is telling you something far more serious?

General Surgery News

I pick a topic each month and discuss it in detail on my social media accounts.



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Specialist General Surgeon



What is the goal of surgery?

The goal of surgery is to remove the blockage, resect (cut out) any dead or damaged intestine, restore bowel continuity or create a temporary stoma if needed. Surgery can be done open or laparoscopically, depending on the case.

Recovery and long-term care

Recovery depends on the severity and whether surgery was needed. Post-treatment recommendations: slow reintroduction of food starting with clear liquids, pain management, early ambulation to prevent clots and encourage bowel movement, wound care (if surgery was done), regular follow-ups to monitor healing and prevent recurrence.

What Causes intestinal obstruction?

Intestinal obstruction can be caused by mechanical issues like scar tissue (adhesions), hernias, tumours or twisting of the intestines (volvulus). Functional obstructions, where the intestines stop moving properly, can occur after surgery or due to certain illnesses. Other rare causes include impacted stool, gallstones or swallowed foreign objects.

Common Symptoms

Symptoms of intestinal obstruction include crampy abdominal pain, bloating, nausea and vomiting. Patients may also experience constipation or an inability to pass gas. In severe cases, symptoms can worsen rapidly and lead to signs of infection or shock.

Diagnosing intestinal obstruction

We rely on imaging and clinical evaluation. You may undergo: Abdominal X-rays: to detect air-fluid levels and dilated bowel loops. A CT scan will be used for locating the obstruction and identifying complications like bowel ischemia or perforation. In some cases, ultrasound may also be utilized, especially in children or pregnant patients, to provide additional diagnostic clarity.

How is an intestinal obstruction treated?



Treatment for intestinal obstruction depends on the cause and severity. Partial or functional obstructions may be managed without surgery using IV fluids, bowel rest and a nasogastric tube. Complete or complicated obstructions often require urgent surgery to remove the blockage and any damaged intestine.

What happens if treatment is delayed?

Delaying treatment for an intestinal obstruction can be fatal. The blocked section of the intestine can lose its blood supply (strangulation). It can lead to necrosis (tissue death) and sepsis (a life-threatening infection) can develop.