

Laparoscopic Appendectomy

By Sharon Schaefer, MD

Did you know that appendicitis affects one in 15 people in their lifetime? The appendix is a finger-sized pouch that is attached to the first part of the large intestine, and may become swollen in response to an infection in the body. This inflammation is called appendicitis. Generally, it is most common in people ages 10 to 30. Though no one knows the exact purpose of the appendix, we do know we can function without it.

Along with infection, appendicitis may also be caused by blockage from stool, cancer or other foreign bodies. The most common symptoms of this condition are abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting. Some may also experience loss of appetite, fever, inability to pass gas and abdominal swelling. In some cases there may be painful urination, severe cramps, constipation or diarrhea.

Symptoms can often be misleading as other abdominal and pelvic conditions can mimic the signs of appendicitis. Your physician may perform an ultrasound or CT scan to identify a swollen or abscessed appendix, and a blood test to check for an elevated white blood cell count, a sign that your body is fighting an infection.

If the appendix shows signs of inflammation, it is surgically removed before it ruptures and spreads infection into the abdominal cavity, which can be fatal. Sometimes, even if the patient does not appear to have appendicitis but displays several symptoms, a physician may choose to remove the appendix to prevent problems in the future. The two procedures to remove the appendix are an appendectomy and a laparoscopic appendectomy.

In a laparoscopic appendectomy procedure three or four small incisions are made in the abdomen. In one incision the surgeon inserts a laparoscope, a thin lighted tube attached to a video monitor outside of the body, to see the inflamed appendix. Surgical tools are used in the other incisions to remove the appendix. Once the appendix has been removed, the incisions are closed with stitches. This method is less invasive than a traditional open appendectomy. Patients often go home the same day and return to normal activities within days.

In some cases, complications prevent a laparoscopic procedure, so your physician may recommend an open appendectomy. In this procedure the appendix is removed through a larger incision two to three inches long in the right lower abdomen. An open appendectomy often

results in a longer hospital stay and recovery period than the laparoscopic procedure. Patients typically return to normal activities within two to three weeks.

Because a ruptured appendix can be fatal, it is critical that anyone experiencing the symptoms of appendicitis consult with a physician or report to the nearest emergency room.

Sources:

WebMD (www.webmd.com)

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