

# Could you have silent gallstones?

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(HealthDay)—As many as 20 million Americans have gallstones. Most don't have any symptoms, but not all will escape a gallstone attack.

The [gallbladder](#) is a small organ in the upper right abdomen. It's a reservoir for bile, the fluid made by the liver to aid digestion. Experts aren't sure why, but gallstones form from imbalances in the substances that make up bile, such as cholesterol. You can have one or hundreds of gallstones, and they can be as small as a grain of sand or the size of a golf ball.

## Gallstones: Who's Most at Risk:

- Women.
- Anyone age 40 and older.
- Anyone with a family history of gallstones.
- Native Americans.
- Mexican Americans.

"Silent" gallstones don't interfere with the function of the gallbladder, liver or nearby pancreas. Often they're discovered during an imaging test for

another health concern.

If a gallstone blocks any of the ducts that connect the gallbladder to the liver or pancreas, you can suffer a gallbladder attack. It often happens at night, after a [heavy meal](#), and the pain can last for several hours. The attack usually stops when the stone moves. But if the duct remains blocked, you risk complications such as inflammation or infection. Untreated blockages can be fatal if they stop the pancreas from working normally.

The [good news](#) is that serious gallbladder attacks affect only about 8 percent of people with stones, according to a Danish study. Most at risk are women in general and people who have one large stone or multiple stones.

Whether or not you know you have gallstones, know the signs of a potentially serious [gallstone](#) event and contact your doctor even if the pain goes away.

## Warning Signs of Gallstone-Related Infection or Inflammation:

- Abdominal pain lasting more than 5 hours.
- Fever or chills.
- Jaundice, the yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Tea-colored urine and light-colored stools.

If tests confirm stones, you may want—or need—to have your gallbladder removed, a very common operation. And because the gallbladder isn't essential, you can live normally without it.

**More information:** Read more about [gallstones](#) at the U.S. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

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