

Gallstones

Gallstones are small, hard “stones” of bile that form in the gallbladder. The gallbladder is an organ shaped like a small bag near the liver. It holds bile, a liquid that helps digest food.

What causes gallstones?

Gallstones happen more often in people with sickle cell disease. Sickled red blood cells break down much faster than normal red blood cells. When these cells break down, they release bilirubin. Bilirubin turns into bile. Bile collects in the gallbladder and can form gallstones.

About half of people with sickle cell disease will have gallstones. Most people do not get them until they are teenagers or adults. Not everyone with sickle cell disease will develop gallstones.

Sometimes, the gallstones may get stuck in the tube that carries bile into the intestines and cause belly pain. Rarely, this can cause serious infection.

What are the symptoms of gallstones?

- Pain on the **right side** of the belly or in the upper, middle part of the belly
- Nausea (sick to the stomach or queasy).
- Vomiting, pain, or bloating, especially after eating greasy or spicy foods.
- Yellow eyes or jaundice that is worse than usual.

NOTE: Some people have gallstones for many years without any pain or other problems.

How are gallstones diagnosed?

- Talk to your medical provider if you have any symptoms of gallstones.
- X-rays or ultrasound may be done to look for gallstones.

How are gallstones treated?

- Avoid greasy and spicy foods if they cause stomach pain.
- If the gallstones are causing pain, surgery may be needed to take out the gallbladder. Most people have very few problems with this surgery and stay in the hospital for 1 or 2 days afterwards.

