

Gallstones and Bariatric Surgery: What You Need to Know

What Are Gallstones?

Gallstones are **solid particles** that form in the gallbladder, a small organ beneath the liver that stores bile.

They usually form when bile contains too much cholesterol or when the gallbladder does not empty properly.

Gallstones may:

- Cause **no symptoms** (asymptomatic), or
- Cause symptoms such as abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, or complications if they block bile ducts.

Why Are Gallstones Common After Bariatric Surgery?

Gallstones are more common after bariatric surgery due to **rapid weight loss**, especially in the first 6–18 months after surgery.

Rapid weight loss can:

- Increase cholesterol concentration in bile
- Reduce gallbladder emptying
- Promote gallstone formation

Not everyone who develops gallstones will experience symptoms.

Current Recommendations

Management of gallstones after bariatric surgery depends on symptoms, individual risk factors, and clinical findings.

Monitoring for Symptoms

- Routine removal of the gallbladder is **not recommended for all patients**
- Many patients are managed with **observation only**

- Patients are advised to report symptoms such as:
 - Upper abdominal pain (especially after meals)
 - Nausea or vomiting
 - Fever or jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes)

Medication to Reduce Risk

- Some patients may be prescribed **ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA)** for a limited period after surgery
- UDCA can reduce the risk of gallstone formation during rapid weight loss
- This is considered on a **case-by-case basis** and is not suitable for everyone

Prophylactic Cholecystectomy (Gallbladder Removal)

- Preventive removal of the gallbladder **is not routinely recommended**
- It may be considered if:
 - You already have symptomatic gallstones
 - Gallbladder disease is identified before surgery
 - Another clear clinical indication exists

Your surgeon will discuss this with you if relevant.

Diet and Lifestyle

After bariatric surgery:

- Follow recommended **post-operative dietary guidelines**
- Gradual, steady weight loss may reduce gallstone risk
- Maintain hydration
- Attend regular follow-up appointments

Diet alone cannot fully prevent gallstones, but it supports overall recovery and health.

What Happens If I Get Gallstones?

If gallstones cause symptoms:

- Further assessment may include blood tests and imaging (such as ultrasound)
- Treatment depends on severity and may include:
 - Observation
 - Medication
 - Surgery to remove the gallbladder (cholecystectomy)

Gallbladder removal is a common and generally safe procedure when clinically indicated.

Final Notes

Gallstones are a **known and relatively common issue** after bariatric surgery, particularly during periods of rapid weight loss.

Most patients do not require preventative gallbladder removal, and management is tailored to individual risk and symptoms.

If you experience symptoms or have concerns, please contact your surgeon or healthcare team promptly.

Evidence-Based Resources

The following reputable sources provide evidence-based information on gallstones and bariatric surgery:

- **Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS)**
Patient information on gallbladder disease and surgery
<https://www.surgeons.org>
- **Australian and New Zealand Metabolic and Obesity Surgery Society (ANZMOSS)**
Bariatric surgery information and post-operative considerations
<https://anzmoss.com.au>
- **UpToDate® (Patient Education)**
Gallstones and bariatric surgery (available via healthcare providers)
- **National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)**
Gallstone disease and obesity surgery guidance
<https://www.nice.org.uk>
- **American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery (ASMBS)**
Patient education on bariatric surgery complications
<https://asmbs.org>

This information is intended as general guidance and does not replace personalised medical advice.

