

WHAT IS HERNIA?

TECHNICALLY, HERNIA IS THE PROTRUSION OF AN ORGAN, OR A PART OF AN ORGAN, THROUGH THE WALL OF THE cavity that normally contains it. In Singapore, when we talk about hernia, we most commonly refer to inguinal hernia, where a weakness in the abdominal wall allows a part of the internal organs to push out from the lower abdomen; but hernia can develop in virtually any part of the body, from the spine to the stomach and bowels. Other common hernias are the umbilical hernia (which occurs at the belly button) and the incisional hernia (which occurs at the site of a previous operation).

Inguinal hernias most often present as bulges in the groin region that become more prominent when coughing, straining or standing up; so if you have ever wondered why doctors tell you to drop your pants, turn to the side and cough during a full body checkup, chances are they were examining you for early signs of inguinal hernia. This bulge tends to disappear when lying down and may be accompanied by signs of bowel obstruction such as nausea or constipation. It is usually not painful initially: all the patient may feel is a slight discomfort in the groin region, like a muscle strain in the area from over-exercising.

It is worth noting that men are several times more likely to develop inguinal hernia compared to women. This is because the inguinal canal - a part of the body that holds the spermatic cord - is significantly more patent in men as the cord lies within compared to women, making it weaker overall and thus more prone to developing a hernia.

In most cases, it is not only possible but advisable for one to go through a simple surgery to repair the hernia so as to prevent further incarceration and strangulation of the hernia. A hernia is considered to be incarcerated when it cannot be manually pushed back into the cavity; a strangulated hernia, on the other hand, is when blood supply is cut off to the site of the hernia, causing the contents within the hernia sac to turn bluish and tender. If it is not treated urgently, it could be fatal.

In adults, the surgical procedure is called herniorrhaphy and can be done either by conventional open surgery or by laparoscopic surgery (also known as keyhole surgery). In either instance, a mesh - made of a strong but soft and inert compound - is placed in the herniated area to strengthen the area and prevent the protrusion. Despite it being a laparoscopic procedure, it may be more painful if extraperitoneal approach is done, as a false space has to be created to insert the mesh.

Hernia trusses are devices supposedly designed to help keep the hernia in place and prevent it from becoming worse. However, there is currently no scientific proof that such devices are in any way effective at stopping the hernia from progressing, and some trusses have been known to cause further complications such as strangulation of the hernia, atrophy of the spermatic cord beneath the hernia and so on. Hence as a rule, truss should not be used.

While there is no surefire way of preventing hernias, there are a few things that you can do to lower your risk of developing a hernia:

- If you are overweight, follow your doctor's advice on losing weight through dieting and exercise. Avoid starving yourself or crash dieting as overly rapid weight loss has also been correlated with hernia development!
- Avoid lifting, pulling, and pushing heavy objects. Use proper techniques when needed. Bend at your knees and lift using your legs rather than your back.
- Avoid constipation and straining during bowel movements and urination. Straining causes increased pressure inside the abdomen. Eat foods that are high in fibre, and drink plenty of fluids. ■



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