Will gallstones affect my baby?



ASK THE DOCTOR

You asked and **Dr Vincent Karuhanga** is here to respond to all your health questions.

I am four months pregnant. A routine ultrasound scan showed I have gallstones. Will they affect my baby?
Ramula

Dear Ramula,
Gallstones can form in the gallbladder if one's bile contains too much cholesterol for example in an obese person or too much bilirubin (a chemical that is produced when body breaks down red blood cells) as is the case in persons with sickle cell anaemia or when the gallbladder does not empty properly.

Most gallstones have no or a few symptoms which may include abdominal pain below the right rib cage, a gaseous stomach or nausea and vomiting that may be confused with peptic ulcers. You may have got gallstones in this or previous pregnancies but without symptoms to show for them because they commonly occur in women during pregnancy.

High levels of oestrogen during pregnancy or when a woman is taking combined contraceptive pills, can cause the cholesterol levels in bile to spike, leading to gallstones.

Pregnant women who already have gallstones run a higher risk that these stones will block the release of the bile leading to more serious symptoms. Unfortunately, gallstones may be confused with morning sickness since both have the same symptoms. This and the fact that most gallstones may not cause symptoms, is why they were discovered during a routine ultrasound check.

You should keep going for your antenatal visits so that advice is given in case symptoms develop but your doctor will most likely wait for you to deliver before starting treatment, which is usually done if one has symptoms that may require surgery or the use of an ultrasound machine to crush the stones or drugs to dissolve them.