

Pain in lower left abdomen: When to worry



SURGEON'S CORNER

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Most people have felt it before — a dull ache, sharp stab, cramp, or heavy discomfort in the lower left side of the abdomen. It may appear after a heavy meal, during constipation, around menstruation, after exercise, or for no obvious reason at all. Sometimes it settles quickly. Other times it lingers or comes with fever, vomiting, diarrhoea, bloating, or changes in bowel habits.

Doctors call this area the left iliac fossa — simply the lower left corner of the abdomen. Pain here deserves attention because several important organs and structures lie nearby.

The difficulty is that many different conditions can cause pain in this region. Some are minor and improve with simple care. Others require urgent medical attention.

WHAT LIES IN LOWER LEFT ABDOMEN?
This area contains part of the large

intestine, loops of small intestine, muscles, nerves, blood vessels and other soft tissues. In women, the left ovary and fallopian tube are also nearby. Pain from the urinary system, especially the tube carrying urine from the kidney to the bladder, may also be felt here.

That is why the same pain can mean different things in different people. In a young woman, it may relate to the ovary. In an older adult, the bowel may be responsible. In an active person, it may simply be muscle strain. In another, it may be a urinary stone.

COULD IT SIMPLY BE CONSTIPATION?

Yes. Constipation is one of the commonest causes of lower abdominal discomfort. When stool builds up in the colon, it can cause cramping, bloating, heaviness, poor appetite and pain that is often worse on the left side.

It is more likely in people who pass hard stool, strain frequently, go many days without opening the bowels, drink little water, eat little fibre, ignore the urge to pass stool, or live a sedentary lifestyle.

For many people, increasing water intake, eating more fruits and vegetables, exercising regularly and maintaining a regular toilet routine can help. However, constipation that is new, severe, associated with weight loss, blood in stool, vomiting or abdominal swelling should not be ignored.

WHAT ABOUT DIVERTICULITIS?

As people grow older, small pockets called diverticula can form in the wall of the colon. When these pockets become inflamed or infected, the condition is called diverticulitis.

It commonly causes lower left abdominal pain, fever, tenderness, nausea and changes in bowel habits. Some people develop diarrhoea, while others become constipated.

Mild cases may improve with medicines and dietary changes, but

HOW IS IT TREATED

Treatment depends entirely on the cause.

Constipation may improve with fibre, fluids, exercise, bowel routine, and sometimes medicines. IBS may require dietary adjustments, stress management and targeted medication. Diverticulitis may need antibiotics, fluids, pain control, or surgery. Ovarian and pelvic conditions may require gynaecological care. Urinary stones may need pain relief, hydration, medicines, or procedures. Muscle strain often improves with rest and physiotherapy.

The wrong treatment can delay recovery. Repeatedly taking painkillers for a worsening abdominal infection, for example, may hide symptoms while the disease progresses.

severe cases can require hospital admission, intravenous antibiotics, drainage of an abscess, or surgery. Increasing lower left abdominal pain accompanied by fever should never be treated casually at home.

IS IT IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) can cause cramping, bloating, gas, abdominal discomfort, diarrhoea, constipation or alternating diarrhoea and constipation. Pain often improves after passing stool or gas.

Although IBS can significantly affect quality of life, it does not usually cause bleeding, fever, severe weight loss, persistent vomiting, or steadily worsening symptoms. If these warning signs are present, the problem should not be dismissed as "just IBS" without proper evaluation.

COULD IT BE BOWEL INFLAMMATION?

Some people develop chronic inflammatory bowel diseases such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease, though these are less common among black Africans.

These conditions may cause abdominal pain, diarrhoea, blood or mucus in stool, weight loss, anaemia, fatigue, fever and poor appetite.

Such symptoms require medical review and may need stool tests, blood tests, imaging, or colonoscopy. Early diagnosis is important because untreated inflammation can lead to

complications.

WOMEN'S SPECIAL ATTENTION

In women, lower left abdominal pain may arise from the reproductive organs.

An ovarian cyst may cause dull pain, heaviness, painful intercourse, menstrual changes, or sudden severe pain if the cyst twists or ruptures. Pelvic infections may cause fever, abnormal vaginal discharge, painful sex, or pain during urination.

One particularly dangerous condition is an ectopic pregnancy, where a pregnancy grows outside the womb, usually in the fallopian tube. This may cause lower abdominal pain, dizziness, fainting, shoulder-tip pain, vaginal bleeding, or collapse. It is a medical emergency.

Any woman of reproductive age with lower abdominal pain should consider the possibility of pregnancy, even if it was not planned or expected. A simple pregnancy test can be lifesaving.

CAN URINARY SYSTEM CAUSE THE PAIN?

Yes. A stone travelling from the kidney to the bladder can cause severe pain that begins in the back or side and moves toward the lower abdomen or groin. The pain often comes in waves and may be associated with nausea, vomiting, blood in urine, frequent urination, or burning during urination.

Urinary tract infections may also cause lower abdominal pain, fever, burning urine, urgency, or cloudy urine. If the infection spreads to the kidney, symptoms may include back pain, chills, vomiting, and weakness.

MUSCLES, HERNIAS, OR BONES BE?

Not all lower abdominal pain comes from internal organs. Muscle strain after lifting, exercise, coughing, or twisting can cause localised pain.

Hernias may also cause discomfort, especially during standing, coughing, lifting, or straining. A swelling may appear in the groin or lower abdomen.

Pain from the hip, pelvis, lower back, or abdominal wall can also be felt in this area, which is why proper examination matters.

WHEN TO SEEK URGENT MEDICAL HELP?

Do not delay seeking care if the pain is associated with:

- fever.
- persistent vomiting.
- fainting or dizziness.
- pregnancy or possible pregnancy.
- blood in stool or black stool.
- blood in urine.
- severe abdominal swelling.
- inability to pass stool or gas.
- rapidly worsening pain.
- unexplained weight loss.
- a painful groin swelling.
- confusion or extreme weakness
- pain after trauma

These symptoms may point to a more serious condition.

CAN THIS PAIN BE PREVENTED?

Some causes can be reduced through healthy habits: eating enough fibre, drinking water, exercising regularly, treating urinary infections early, seeking care for pelvic or menstrual symptoms, avoiding unnecessary self-medication and attending age-appropriate health checks.

But not all causes are preventable. That is why persistent, severe, or unexplained pain should always be assessed properly.