

Umbilical and Paraumbilical Hernia

This is a less common type of hernia. In this instance a bulge appears at or around the navel because of a weakness in the abdominal wall in this area. An umbilical hernia is common in new born babies and may persist (normally) for up to two years. These hernias are often without symptoms (asymptomatic). The failure of this kind of hernia to close naturally will eventually require surgical correction. Any sudden swelling, tenderness or reddened skin in the umbilicus regardless of the patients age should alert the patient to the possibility that an umbilical hernia may have become strangulated and will require immediate surgical repair.

What is a hernia?

A hernia is an abnormal protrusion of part of the intestines through a weak part of the abdomen, that is, part of the guts are poking through the abdominal wall. Normally, the front of the abdomen has several layers comprising of skin then fat then muscles and broad ligaments. Underneath all these lie the intestines (guts). If, for any reason, there is a weak point in the muscles or ligaments, part of the intestines push through. You can then feel a soft lump under the skin.

What are the symptoms?

Sometimes they are noticed after a strain, for example, lifting a heavy object. Sometimes they come on for no good reason and a small lump may be noticed, usually in the groin area. Usually, at first, the lump can be pushed back, but may pop out after straining again. Coughing is a common strain that brings them out. They are not usually painful, but many people feel an ache over a hernia. In time they might become bigger as the gap in their muscle or ligament tissue becomes larger. Sometimes in men they track down into the scrotum.

Are they serious?

Usually not. However, treatment to fix them is usually advised for 2 reasons:

- They may gradually become bigger and more uncomfortable.
- There is a small chance they might strangulate. A hernia strangulates when too much intestine has come through the gap in the muscle or ligament and then it becomes squeezed. This cuts off the blood supply to the portion of intestine in the hernia. This can lead to severe pain and some damage to the part of the intestines in the hernia. These strangulated hernias are uncommon and are usually dealt with by emergency surgery. However it is preferable to have the hernia fixed by routine rather than emergency surgery.

Treatment

Surgical repair to an umbilical or paraumbilical hernia is usually performed as a day case. A small incision is made just below the protrusion, the contents of the hernia are returned to the abdomen and the defect is sutured closed. A mesh may be fixed over the defect if it is large. Return to work can usually be expected within four days but heavy lifting should be avoided for three weeks.