

Incisional Hernia

An incisional hernia is a defect in the abdominal wall that develops as a complication of prior abdominal surgery. Tissue breakdown or poor healing of an abdominal incision may lead to the formation of a defect in the abdominal wall. The possibility exists for a portion of intestine or other intra-abdominal contents to protrude and become trapped through the defect. This may be noticed by the patient as an intermittent bulge in the area of a surgical scar that may appear larger with coughing, straining or lifting.

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 correction of an incisional hernia is usually undertaken under General (or Spinal) anaesthetic and can sometimes be performed as a day case. The procedure can be performed as an open operation but it may be possible to repair the defect with keyhole surgery. The hernial contents are returned to the abdominal cavity and the defect repaired. A mesh is often sutured over the repair to strengthen the repair and decrease the likelihood of a recurrence of the hernia.

Speed of recovery will depend upon the size of the defect and whether a keyhole operation was performed.