

Patient education: Appendicitis in adults (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is the appendix? — The appendix is a long, thin pouch that is shaped like a finger. It hangs down from the large intestine, which is also called the colon ([figure 1](#)).

What is appendicitis? — Appendicitis is the name for when the appendix gets infected and inflamed. If that happens, it can swell and in some cases burst. That's dangerous, because a burst appendix can cause infection in the belly.

What are the symptoms of appendicitis? — The usual symptoms include:

- Severe pain in the lower part of the belly, on the right side. (For many people, the pain starts near the belly button and then moves to the lower right side.)
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever

Some people can have different symptoms, such as:

- Stomach upset
- Having a lot of gas
- Irregular bowel movements
- Diarrhea
- Feeling ill

Is there a test for appendicitis? — Your doctor or nurse can run tests that can help him or her find the cause of your symptoms. But if you do have appendicitis, he or she will probably be able to diagnose it just by doing an exam. Your doctor or nurse can learn a lot about your condition by pressing on your belly and talking with you about your symptoms.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — Yes. Call your doctor or nurse right away if you have the symptoms listed above. The risk of your appendix bursting is much higher after the first 24 hours of symptoms. If the appendix bursts, the surgery to treat it will be more complicated.

How is appendicitis treated? — The main treatment for appendicitis is surgery to remove the appendix. This surgery can be done in 2 ways:

- **Open surgery** – During an open surgery, the doctor makes a cut near the appendix that is big enough to pull the appendix through.

- **Laparoscopic surgery** – During laparoscopic surgery, the doctor makes a few cuts that are much smaller than those used in open surgery. Then he or she inserts long, thin tools into the belly. One of the tools has a camera (called a "laparoscope") on the end, which sends pictures to a TV screen. The doctor can look at the image on the screen to know where to cut and what to remove. Then he or she uses the long tools to do the surgery.

If your appendix has burst, your surgery will probably be more complicated than it would be if it had not burst. Your doctor will need to wash away the material that spills out when an appendix bursts. As a result, your cuts might be larger or you might spend more time in surgery.

Can appendicitis be treated without surgery? — If it has been a few days since your appendix burst, your doctor might decide not to do surgery at all. That's because the body sometimes forms a wall inside the belly, to block off the area that became infected when the appendix burst. In a case like this, doctors usually give antibiotics and carefully watch the person. They might be able to avoid doing surgery right away, since it can be more difficult in people who fit this description. But many people will need surgery later to take out the appendix.

Even if your appendix has not burst, it's possible to treat appendicitis with just antibiotics. But, without surgery, there is a good chance your appendicitis will come back again. So surgery is still the best treatment in most cases.

What if I am pregnant? — If you are pregnant and think you have signs of appendicitis, make sure you tell your doctors that you are pregnant.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Appendicitis in children \(The Basics\)](#)

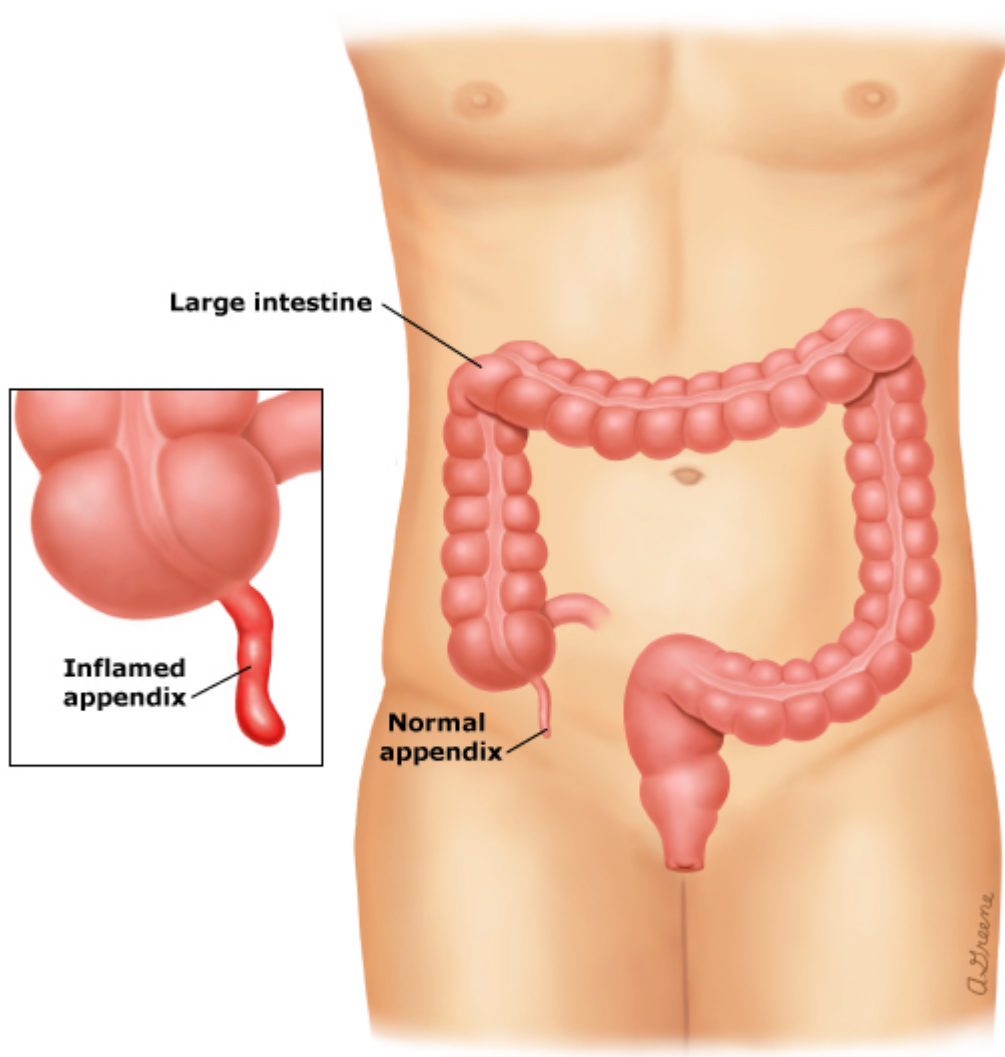
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GRAPHICS

Appendicitis



The appendix is a thin pouch that hangs down from a part of the large intestine. Appendicitis is the term doctors use when the appendix gets infected and inflamed.

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