Appendicitis [1]

Dear Alice,

What are the symptoms for appendicitis?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although the appendix (which is attached to the colon) doesn’t have a clear purpose and goes mostly unnoticed, it’s clear when it’s time for it to come out. Appendicitis, or the inflammation of the appendix, occurs when there’s a blockage in the lining the appendix. Symptoms vary throughout the duration of the condition and from person-to-person (more on those in a bit). Treatment usually involves surgery, but most people fully recover in a matter of weeks. In any case, it’s critical to seek out medical attention if any appendicitis-like symptoms are present because the condition can be life-threatening.

When there is a blockage inside the appendix, it causes the organ to become infected and inflamed. The pain associated with the condition commonly originates in the belly button area and progresses in severity over time. Other early symptoms include loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and a low-grade fever. Then, after about 12 to 24 hours after the illness starts, the pain shifts towards the lower right-hand side of the abdomen, just over the appendix (there are exceptions to this; one example: pregnant women may feel the pain progress to the upper right side of the abdomen). The spot even has a name: the McBurney’s point. Later symptoms of appendicitis can also include:

- Pain that worsens with movement
- Vomiting and nausea
- Constipation, diarrhea, or bloating
- Fever

If left untreated, the condition may progress and the appendix can actually rupture. Interestingly, after a rupture, the pain may go away for a short time, but typically returns with increased severity. Though the outlook for those able to get treatment prior to a rupture is good, a burst appendix is life-threatening condition. If and when any of these symptoms are present, visiting the nearest emergency room is advised. To determine whether appendicitis is the cause for these symptoms, a series of physical exams, blood tests, a urine test, or image tests (CT scan [2] or ultrasound) may be performed.
Most treatment protocols call for antibiotics and surgery (called an appendectomy) to remove the appendix; if treated immediately, before the appendix bursts, most people recover quickly without any adverse health effects. Assuming no complications arise, most people are out of the hospital, resuming their everyday routines, and returning to a normal eating plan, within a few days to a couple of weeks. However, if the appendix does rupture, surgery is still performed, but complications such as an abscess (a pus-filled pocket of infection) may occur. If an abscess is present, it must be drained (before or during the organ removal) and treated with antibiotics to address the infection.

For even more information on appendicitis and its symptoms, check out the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases section on Appendicitis [3].

Here’s hoping this has kept your curiosity on the subject from bursting at the seams!

Alice!
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