

Prevention of Gallstones after Bariatric Surgery

For many people Gallstones can cause no symptoms for many years, but in most patients they eventually lead to pain, illness and the risk of dangerous complications. This means most patients diagnosed with gallstones eventually need to undergo gallbladder removal (Cholecystectomy). Being very overweight, pregnancy and weight loss predispose people to gallstone formation and gallstone symptoms.

Around 10-15% of patients after bariatric surgery will end up undergoing cholecystectomy the following year or two after surgery. Laparoscopic (Keyhole) cholecystectomy is very safe and requires only an overnight hospital stay. Side effects from gallbladder surgery are uncommon with about 1 in 20 people noticing that their bowels get a little looser.

In patients who have had any type of “Bypass” surgery we strongly recommend gallbladder surgery if gallstones are diagnosed after bariatric surgery, regardless of whether symptoms occur. This is because gallstones in Bypass patients can cause dangerous complications. In patients who have other types of weight loss surgery we are happy to adopt a “wait and see” approach, however most patients will end up having complications of gallstones at some stage so will end up having surgery, either as a planned or as an emergency operation. Emergency cholecystectomy operations have a 5-10 x higher complication rate than when performed electively.

In patients who wish to reduce the chances of requiring cholecystectomy, it seems likely that taking a medicine called Ursodeoxycholic acid or “Urso” may reduce the chance of gallstone formation and the need for later cholecystectomy by approximately 50% or even more. Urso causes few side effects for most patients and seems to be well tolerated. It needs to be taken for at least 6 months, and as it is not covered by the PBS it is about \$100 dollars per month for the 500mg daily dose on a Private Prescription.

Taking this medication can reduce the risk of gallstone development in the short term and sometimes dissolve gallstones if they are present, however in many cases gallstones can return years later which is why gallstone dissolving treatments have not been universally adopted.