

Patient information

Dietary advice for people with gallstones

This diet sheet gives some general information to help you make the recommended changes to your diet. If you need more detailed advice or if you are following a special diet that makes it difficult to make these changes, please ask your doctor to refer you to a registered Dietitian.

What are gallstones?

Gallstones are small stones made of bile pigments or calcium deposits that can sometimes form in the gallbladder. They are more common in women. They are more likely to form as we get older. Obesity, smoking and/or pregnancy also increase the risk of developing gallstones. Rapid weight loss can also cause gallstones to form.

Most people with gallstones do not develop any symptoms. However, the gallstones can cause blockage in the bile duct, a tube that connects the gallbladder to the small intestine, making it difficult for bile to be released to help digestion of food. When this happens symptoms such as pain, bloating, nausea (feeling sick), and vomiting (being sick) may occur.

Do I need a special diet?

There is no specific diet for gallstones. Your doctor may have advised you to follow a low-fat diet because you have gallstones. Evidence suggests that people who have gallstones should adopt a **healthy diet**, choosing lower fat options as part of a healthy diet.

Gallstones can cause pain and some people find that certain foods can be a trigger. These foods may be high in fat, but other foods may also cause a problem.

It is important that you do not completely avoid fat in your diet, as a certain amount of fat is needed by the body to avoid deficiencies. It is also virtually impossible to achieve a diet that is completely fat free.

If you are overweight, losing weight will be beneficial. However, it is important to do this gradually, as rapid weight loss has been associated with the development of gallstones. A safe weight loss of 1-2 lbs (0.5 to 1 kg) per week is recommended.

If you are already slim or underweight and are worried about losing weight, please ask your doctor to refer you to a Dietitian.

Note: After a cholecystectomy (removal of the gall bladder) you do not need to follow a low fat diet. Following a healthy diet is advisable for optimal health.

A healthy balanced diet consists of:

- At least five portions of fruit and vegetables per day – 1 portion = 80g or about 1 palmful, and may be fresh, frozen or tinned.
- A portion of starchy carbohydrates at each meal. Examples include bread, rice, cereals, pasta, potatoes, etc. Choose wholegrain varieties where possible.
- Dairy products and calcium-fortified alternatives (2-3 portions per day). Choose low-fat versions.
- Protein foods 2-3 times per day, such as meat, fish, eggs and vegetarian alternatives such as beans and pulses. There is some evidence that regular intake of nuts can help reduce your risk of developing gallstones.
- Limit foods high in fats and sugars. Limit saturated fat that is found in animal products, such as butter, ghee, cheese, meat, cakes, biscuits and pastries. Replace these with unsaturated fats found in non-animal products, such as sunflower, rapeseed and olive oil, avocados, nuts and seeds. But remember that unsaturated fats can also trigger gallstone pain.
- Make sure your diet is high in fibre – aim for 30g per day. This can be found in beans, pulses, fruit and vegetables, oats, and whole grain products, such as bread, pasta and rice.
- Drink plenty of fluids – aim to have at least 6-8 (1.5L - 2.0L) glasses daily. All fluids count, avoid too many drinks with caffeine and choose no added sugar drinks.

It might be helpful to have smaller and more frequent meals. Keep a food and symptom diary to help you identify trigger foods. Avoid these foods for a two-week trial period and note any improvements in symptoms. It is important to reintroduce foods if you do not think they are causing you problems.

Cutting down on fat

The page overleaf shows ways of reducing fat in the diet, which should be done as a part of your healthy balanced diet.

Reducing your fat intake		
Food Group	Avoid or eat less of these foods	Choose these foods instead
Fats and Oils	Butter, margarine, lard, suet, cooking oils including olive oil, sunflower oil, vegetable oil.	Low fat spreads, such as Flora Light, Bertolli Light or half fat butters. Oil sprays for cooking. Still use these sparingly.
Cooking Methods	Fried foods.	Grilled, boiled, baked, poached or casseroled foods.
Dairy Products	Full cream or Jersey milk. Evaporated and condensed milk. Full fat cheese, such as Cheddar or Stilton. Full fat soft cheese. Cream. Full fat yogurt. Milkshakes.	Semi skimmed or fully skimmed milk. Low fat cheese, such as cottage cheese, Edam, half fat hard cheeses. Low fat soft cheese, such as Dairylea Light, Laughing Cow Light, Philadelphia Light. Low fat yogurt, such as Shape, Muller Light, Weight Watchers, Activia 0%. Plant based milks and yogurts.
Meats and Fish	Fatty and processed meat such as sausages, corned beef, beef burgers, meat pies, and tinned meat. Oily fish, such as mackerel, sardines, kippers, tuna in oil.	Red meat (if all visible fat is removed). Chicken and turkey (remove skin). White fish, cod, haddock, plaice, tuna in brine/spring water, shellfish, salmon.
Biscuits and Cakes	Digestives, cream and chocolate biscuits, Hob-Nobs. Cream cakes, Danish pastries, cakes with marzipan, sponge cake.	Crispbread, rice cakes, Rich Tea, Garibaldi, Morning Coffee. Low fat biscuits or cakes. Meringues. Scones, teacakes, crumpets – avoid adding too much butter/spread. Fatless sponge.

Snack Foods	Crisps, nuts, Bombay mix. Seeds (including sunflower, pumpkin)	Low-fat crisps, Skips, French Fries, Quavers, breadsticks, Twiglets. Fruit (fresh, tinned and dried). Popcorn. Rice cakes.
Confectionary	Chocolate, toffee, fudge, coconut.	Boiled fruit sweets, mints, marshmallows, liquorice, Turkish Delight.
Desserts	Fruit pies, fruit crumbles. Milk puddings. Ice-cream. Gateaux.	Low fat yogurts (as above). Sorbet. Jelly, fruit – fresh, cooked or tinned. Low fat ice-cream Low fat milk puddings, such as custard or rice pudding.
Miscellaneous	Creamy dips, hummus, avocado pears, cream soups. Pastry foods such as quiche. Oil-based salad dressings, such as vinaigrette, mayonnaise. Cream and cheese sauces. Gravy made with fat or meat juices.	Low fat salad dressing, salsa dips. Light mayonnaise. Mustard. Balsamic dressing. Lemon juice and herbs dressing. Tomato based or low fat cooking sauces. Sauces made with cornflour and low-fat milk and/or low fat cheese. Gravy made with stock cubes and cornflour (if used, meat juices should have the fat drained). Low fat ready-made meals.

Note: Check labels for high-fat products. You can use the ‘traffic light’ system on labels to help you identify foods that are high in fat content. A product that is high in fat contains 17.5g or more of fat per 100g and will be labelled as red. Look for foods that contain 3g of fat or less per 100g instead. Those would be labelled as green.

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