

# Detecting appendicitis in your children

Some stomachaches are more serious than others. If your child complains of a stomachache, pay close attention to where the pain is.

If the pain progresses over a matter of hours toward the right side of the abdomen or becomes sharper or more intense, it may be a serious problem known as appendicitis.

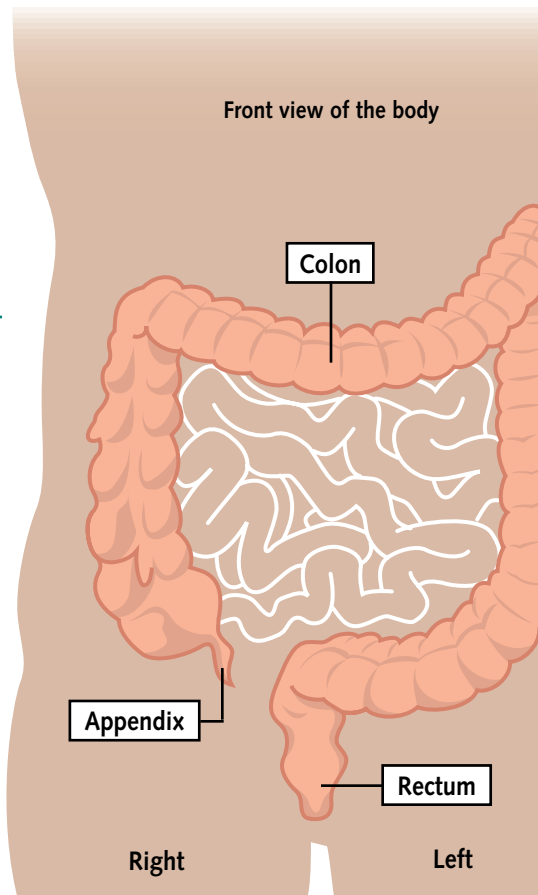
Appendicitis is most common in children over 6 years old but can happen in younger children. Because it can be life-threatening, it is important to recognize the symptoms of appendicitis and call your child's doctor immediately if your child has any of those symptoms. Even when children are not able to tell the doctor exactly what they're feeling, increasingly more accurate

## WHAT IS APPENDICITIS?

Appendicitis is inflammation of the **appendix** (a narrow tube that branches off the large intestine at the lower right-hand side of the abdomen), and usually occurs in children and young adults. The appendix has no apparent function in the body. But if an inflamed appendix is not treated, it can rupture and cause serious health problems. If it ruptures and releases its contents into the abdomen, it can cause **peritonitis** (inflammation of the lining of the abdominal cavity). Appendicitis usually results from obstruction of the appendix, most frequently by a lump of feces.

diagnostic tools can help doctors to determine if the child has appendicitis.

A study in the September 15, 1999, issue of *JAMA* reports that using **ultrasonography** (reflected sound waves that generate images) and **computed tomography** (an x-ray technique using computer programming to provide detailed x-ray images) can be helpful in diagnosing appendicitis in children.



## SYMPTOMS:

- The first symptom is usually pain in the belly button area that gradually worsens and often moves toward the right side of the abdomen. The abdominal pain may become worse when moving, taking deep breaths, coughing, sneezing, or being touched in the area. Sometimes the pain can be elsewhere in the abdomen, especially in small children.
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Low fever that may begin after pain
- Constipation, although some children have small, mucousy stools

## WHAT TO DO:

Because of the threat of rupture, appendicitis is considered an emergency. If you think your child has appendicitis, see a doctor immediately.

## TREATMENT:

Appendicitis is treated with **appendectomy** (surgery to remove the appendix). People can live a normal life without their appendix.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases  
National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse  
2 Information Way  
Bethesda, MD 20892-3570 or  
[www.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.niddk.nih.gov)

## INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at [www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm).

*Additional Sources:* National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, *American Academy of Pediatrics' Caring for Your Baby & Young Child: Birth to Age 5*, *AMA's Encyclopedia of Medicine*

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