

FAST FACTS: Differentiating Abdominal Pain: Pancreatitis, Cholecystitis, Appendicitis, and Gastroenteritis

The source of abdominal pain can be very difficult to identify in the older adult. Abdominal pain in the older adult is much more likely to be related to serious medical conditions. Constipation and urinary tract infection (UTI) are the most common sources of abdominal discomfort. However, older adults should be screened for pancreatitis, cholecystitis, appendicitis, and gastroenteritis. Older adults experience atypical signs and symptoms; and misdiagnosis is common – potentially resulting in death. An “acute abdomen” needs immediate attention. These conditions often cause a fever; however, older adults present with a normal temperature and may have altered mental status and weakness. (Also see “Abdominal Pain Management Guide”; See “Chest Pain Management Guide” for information on GERD)

- **Pancreatitis – Inflammation of the Pancreas**
 - Upper abdominal pain/tenderness may radiate to back
 - Pain increases after eating (indigestion)
 - Nausea/Vomiting
 - Weight loss
 - Oily smelly stools
- **Cholecystitis – Inflammation of Gallbladder**
 - Upper right abdominal pain/tenderness may radiate to right shoulder or back
 - Bloating
 - Fever
 - Chills
 - Nausea/Vomiting
- **Appendicitis – Inflammation of the Appendix**
 - Lower right abdominal pain/tenderness that increases with time and may worsen with movement or coughing
 - Nausea/Vomiting and loss of appetite
 - Abdominal swelling
 - Constipation/inability to pass gas
- **Gastrointestinal Bleed (GI bleed)**
 - Overt (obvious) - rectal bleeding, dark tarry stools, vomiting blood
 - Occult (hidden) - abdominal pain, hypotension, lightheadedness, fainting, chest pain
- **Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm**
 - Severe abdominal, back or flank pain
 - Syncope
 - Hypotension with pulsatile abdominal mass

Assessment: Abdominal pain should be investigated immediately as treatment delays are the most common causes of death.

- Thorough abdominal assessment
- Onset and frequency of pain/discomfort
- Vital signs

Interventions:

- Pain management focuses on treatment of the underlying causes.
- Opioid analgesics also help to reduce the severe pain
- Call 911- send to the Emergency Department

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References

Ryan Spangler, R Manning, S Disaster Diagnoses in Geriatric Patients with Abdominal Pain, Emergency Medicine Clinics of North America, Volume 39, Issue 2, 2021, Pages 347-360, ISSN 0733-8627, ISBN 9780323776622, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emc.2021.01.011> Accessed April 23, 2023