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What is a hernia?

The Doctor says...

Doctor, I have a bulge in my stomach. Do I have a hernia? What is a Hernia?

Thanks for that interesting question. What you are experiencing may in fact be a hernia as you suspected. Let's talk a little about hernias. A hernia is a movement of a part of the body into another region where it doesn't belong, generally through an opening that is either abnormal or is abnormally large so as to allow the passage of this tissue. This is often a result of genetic defect from before birth, or acquired from straining such as heavy lifting. Hernias affect men, women, and children of all ages.

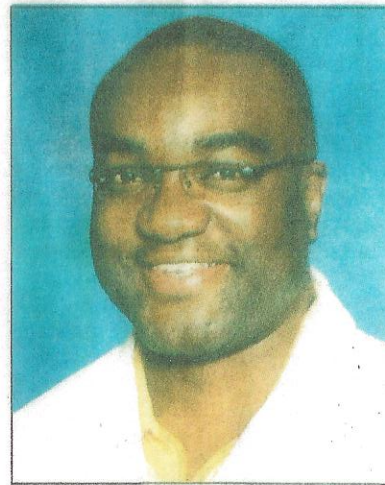
What are the types of hernias?

One of the most common is an 'inguinal hernia' which is found in the groin area. A hernia can form there when there is an

abnormal opening from the abdominal cavity to the groin. In individuals with this opening or with constant straining (leading to pressure of the abdominal contents), these contents (including the bowel) can pass down into the groin area. Other types of hernias include 'incisional hernias' (where a previous operation leaves an abdominal wall defect through which contents can bulge out), 'ventral hernias' (where a defect in the wall of the abdomen allows abdominal content to bulge through), 'femoral hernias' (alongside the blood vessels to the leg), and 'umbilical hernias' (protruding through the umbilicus/"belly-button").

What are the potential problems with hernias?

The most common symptoms that bring patients to see their



Dr. H. Charles-Harris

doctors are pain/pressure and an abnormal appearance. Often their bulge can be manually pushed back into the abdomen. However, if the contents of the hernia become caught in the narrow abdominal opening, the blood supply can get cut off causing the bowel to die and its contents leak, leading to significant and potentially life-threat-

ening complications. When this happens, the patients require emergency surgery!

What are the options of treatment?

One option that some patients choose is just to watch the hernia. Unfortunately, for most of us, over time the opening increases in size and when finally is corrected, requires a considerably more difficult surgical repair, with higher chance of complications. Additionally, if the bowel bulges out and dies, it can lead to serious complications and even death. Nowadays watching a hernia because it's not painful or bothersome may not be the correct approach. Preventative treatment involving surgery at the patient's convenience is the most corrective approach because it is safer and avoids emergency surgery. Fixing the hernia would involve making an incision (or using a laparoscopic technique, commonly called laser) to either sew shut

the opening or to place a piece of mesh over the opening to prevent the bulging out of the abdominal contents. Each method has its pros and cons and the choice depends on the individual patient.

What's the best approach?

It really depends on you, your hernia, and what you desire. Ultimately, it is your surgeon's responsibility to provide you with the advantages and disadvantages of the procedure. The complication rate is so low that for most people surgical repair is usually the best option. If you have many medical problems, coordination between your primary care doctor and your surgeon is best.

We live in a country where the quality of medical care is so high that for those who choose a surgical repair, the results are probably the best in the world. So I recommend that you see your surgeon as soon as possible for an evaluation.