Low-fat diet, exercise can ease gallbladder problems: NetWellness

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By Special to The Plain Dealer

NetWellness receives many questions about specific diets for those with gallbladder problems.

Whether you have questions about cholecystitis (inflammation of the gallbladder) or a diet after a cholecystectomy (gallbladder removal), NetWellness experts have some helpful tips.

If you have cholecystitis

Cholecystitis occurs more often in women than men and is commonly experienced by pregnant women. Although obesity is linked with gallstones, losing weight too drastically increases your risk of cholecystitis. This condition is more often seen with very low-calorie/high-protein liquid fasts or other "quick fix" types of weight-loss diets.
If you experience pain from cholecystitis, be sure to see your physician as soon as possible. Untreated cholecystitis can be life-threatening. If you have bouts of untreated cholecystitis, you may eventually require surgery to have your gallbladder removed (cholecystectomy).

The best way to prevent cholecystitis is to maintain a normal or ideal weight and eat a diet that is moderate in calories and low in fat. Your diet should include:

- High-fiber foods (fresh fruits and vegetables).
- Whole grains (such as whole wheat bread, oats, brown rice, bran cereal).
- Beans (pinto, navy, black) and lentils.
- Lean meat, such as chicken, turkey or fish (make sure that your poultry is skinless and the fish should not be packed in oil).
- Dairy products should be low-fat (nonfat or 1 percent milk, reduced-fat cheese and cottage cheese). If possible, try to avoid whole-milk products (butter, regular cheese, ice cream), fried foods and highly processed foods (high-fat crackers, doughnuts, processed cake, pie, cookies). A diet high in refined sugar (from soft drinks and sugary desserts mentioned above) also increases the risk of gallstones.

Regular exercise will aid in maintaining your weight loss and appears to help prevent gallstones in both men and women. Some studies suggest regular caffeinated coffee consumption and moderate alcohol aid in preventing gallstones.

If you are pregnant or have had issues with alcohol in the past, you should obviously avoid alcohol. Coffee consumption may also need to be limited during pregnancy as some studies suggest excessive caffeine may cause miscarriages.

**After gallbladder removal (cholecystectomy)**

After a gallbladder removal, it is important to follow a low-fat diet for several weeks or months. Fat tolerance varies from person to person, and therefore the diet needs to be tailored to your needs. This is why speaking to a registered dietitian is recommended. Eventually, you may be able to return to an unrestricted diet.
The main reason for a change in diet is because the body has difficulty in handling fats after a cholecystectomy. Fat and certain fat-soluble vitamins require bile to be absorbed. When the gallbladder is present, it stores bile that the liver makes. During a meal, the gallbladder contracts, releasing a pool of bile into the intestine that is used for fat absorption.

After the gallbladder is removed, bile is still produced by the liver, but it is released in a continuous, slow trickle into the intestine. Thus, when eating a meal that is high in fat, there may not be enough bile in the intestine to properly handle the normal absorption process.

The change in intestinal bile concentration during high-fat intake may cause diarrhea or bloating, because excess fat in the intestine will draw more water into the intestine, and because bacteria digest the fat and produce gas.

People who have had their gallbladder removed have varying tolerances to the very foods that previous to their surgery may have caused gallbladder attacks. These foods may have been high-fat or fried foods as well as whole grain breads and cereals, nuts, seeds or gas-producing vegetables (baked beans) from the cabbage family (broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage or cauliflower). Spicy food seasoned with red or black pepper may cause some discomfort for people with gallbladder disease. Symptoms may range from burping (heartburn) and gas to a feeling of fullness (feeling as if the food isn't going in the right direction).

Things you can do to reduce your symptoms:

- Choose leaner meats, skinless chicken and fish and remove visible fat before cooking.
- Be careful with foods containing hidden fats such as fast foods, full-fat dairy products, convenience meals, toasted sandwiches, pastries, nuts and nut butters.
- Use low-fat dairy products such as nonfat (skim) or low-fat milk, reduced fat cheeses, low-fat yogurt and reduced-fat spreads
- Be mindful when eating out -- choose foods such as vegetable soups, dressing-free salads, grilled fish (with no lemon butter), grilled chicken with no skin and rice or baked potatoes. Eat small portions (plan on taking some home).
- Limit the fat and oil intake to no more than two to three servings per day (1 serving = 1 teaspoon of oil, butter or margarine).

**Things to keep in mind**

Note that all of these suggestions are good for weight loss, too. Go to MyPyramid.gov and enter your age, gender, weight, height and activity level to determine how many calories you should be eating. Then subtract 500 calories per day to create a 3,500-calorie deficit over the course of a week. You will lose a pound for each 3,500-calorie reduction.
If you are eating fewer calories than the above calculation suggests, you may have inadvertently put your body in starvation mode. When this happens your body reduces its basal metabolic rate (BMR) so that you can "live" on fewer calories. Keep your body from going into this mode by spacing food intake no more than four to five hours apart (except overnight). Eat five to six small meals in place of three large meals. However, stay within your calorie limit. Eating small frequent meals spreads out your fat consumption so that more of it can be digested properly when it reaches your intestines as well as keeping your basal metabolic rate higher.

For more help, it is highly recommended that you see a registered dietitian in your area for more individualized help. You can visit the American Dietetic Association website to locate a nutrition professional your area and get a good start on improving your health.

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