SYMPTOM

Colic

Colic is cramping pain that builds and eases in waves, usually in the abdomen or side.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Cramping pain that rises and eases in waves

WHERE IT IS FELT
Belly, upper abdomen, side, back, or groin

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Trapped gas, constipation, stomach or bowel infection

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Severe pain with fever, repeated vomiting, or yellow skin

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes to hours per episode, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Repeated episodes or pain lasting more than a day

Overview

Colic describes pain that comes and goes in waves. It often happens when the muscles of a hollow organ, such as the bowel, gallbladder, or tube carrying urine from a kidney, squeeze against a blockage or irritation.

Colic is a symptom pattern, not a diagnosis. Gas, constipation, infection, and stones can all cause colicky pain. The location, timing, and other symptoms help narrow down the cause.

In babies, "infantile colic" has a different meaning. It describes repeated, prolonged crying in an otherwise healthy baby. It often starts during the first few weeks of life and usually improves within several months.

What it may feel or look like

Colicky pain typically builds, becomes strong, and then eases. You may have little or no pain between waves, or a dull ache may remain. The pain can make it difficult to sit still or find a comfortable position.

The location may offer clues:

Other symptoms may include bloating, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, sweating, urinary discomfort, or changes in stool or urine.

A baby with colic may cry intensely, draw up their legs, clench their fists, or become red in the face. They usually feed and grow normally between episodes.

- Bowel cramps are often felt across the belly
- Gallbladder pain is usually in the upper right or upper middle abdomen
- Kidney stone pain may travel from the side or back toward the groin
- Menstrual cramps are usually low in the abdomen or pelvis

Common causes

Common causes include trapped gas, constipation, and a stomach or bowel infection. Food intolerance and irritable bowel syndrome can cause recurring cramps, although these usually come with changes in bowel habits.

Menstrual cramps can also feel colicky because the uterus tightens and relaxes. In babies, prolonged crying may be described as infantile colic after feeding problems and illness have been considered.

Less common causes include gallstones and kidney stones. Gallstones may cause upper abdominal pain, often after eating, while a stone moving from a kidney may cause intense pain in the side that spreads toward the groin.

Inflammation of the gallbladder, pancreas, bowel, or urinary tract can sometimes begin with cramping pain. Medicines, previous abdominal surgery, and conditions that narrow the bowel may also play a part.

Urgent causes include a blocked bowel, a serious abdominal infection, an ectopic pregnancy, or twisting of an ovary or testicle. These conditions usually cause severe pain or other concerning symptoms, but the pain pattern alone cannot identify the cause.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services or go to an emergency department if the pain is sudden and extreme, or if you also have:

Seek same-day medical care for severe or worsening pain, fever, repeated vomiting, yellow skin or eyes, blood in the urine, or pain when urinating. You should also be assessed promptly if

pain follows an injury or occurs during pregnancy.

For a baby, seek urgent care for green vomit, breathing difficulty, unusual sleepiness, a swollen abdomen, poor feeding, fewer wet diapers, or a cry that sounds weak or unusual. A fever in a baby younger than 3 months needs prompt medical assessment.

Book a routine appointment if episodes keep returning, last longer than a day, disturb sleep, or come with ongoing bowel changes, weight loss, or reduced appetite.

- Fainting, confusion, severe weakness, or trouble breathing
- A hard or very swollen abdomen
- Vomiting blood, bloody stool, or black, sticky stool
- Repeated vomiting with inability to pass stool or gas
- Severe testicular pain or swelling
- Possible pregnancy with severe pain, bleeding, shoulder pain, or faintness

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask where the pain starts, whether it moves, how long each wave lasts, and what makes it better or worse. They may ask about eating, bowel movements, urination, menstrual periods, pregnancy possibility, medicines, and previous surgery.

The examination may include checking your abdomen, temperature, hydration, and urine. Depending on the pattern, tests may include blood tests, a urine test, a pregnancy test, ultrasound, or a CT scan.

For a crying baby, the assessment focuses on feeding, growth, wet diapers, stool, temperature, and a full physical examination. Tests are not always needed when the baby appears well and is growing normally.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Mild cramps related to gas or a short-lived bowel illness may improve with rest, regular sips of fluid, gentle movement, and a warm pack placed over the abdomen. Avoid heat that could burn the skin.

Do not start laxatives for severe unexplained pain, especially if you are vomiting or cannot pass stool or gas. Ask a pharmacist or healthcare professional which pain medicine is suitable for you, particularly if you are pregnant or have kidney, liver, stomach, or bleeding problems.

Kidney stones, gallstones, infections, and bowel problems may need prescription pain relief, fluids, antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline , or a procedure. Antibiotics only help when a bacterial infection is present.

For a crying baby, calm rocking, holding the baby upright during feeds, and pausing for burping may help. Avoid repeatedly changing formula or using supplements, herbal products, or medicines without professional advice. If you feel overwhelmed, place the baby safely in their cot and step away briefly. Never shake a baby.

What to expect

A single episode caused by gas or a minor bowel upset may settle within hours. Pain from stones can return in waves until the stone passes or is treated. Repeated attacks should be assessed even if they disappear between episodes.

Infantile colic usually improves by 3 to 4 months of age. Persistent crying beyond this point, poor growth, or new symptoms should be reviewed.

Because "colic" covers several pain patterns, recovery depends on the underlying cause rather than the intensity of one episode.

Common questions

Is colic the same as trapped gas?

No. Gas can cause colicky cramps, but colic can also come from constipation, infection, stones, or other conditions.

Can adults have colic?

Yes. In adults, the term usually describes wave-like pain, such as intestinal, biliary, or renal colic. These names describe the pain pattern and likely organ involved.

Can the pain location identify the cause?

Location provides clues, but it is not enough by itself. Nearby organs can cause similar pain, and discomfort may travel to the back, shoulder, or groin.

Is infantile colic harmful?

Infantile colic does not usually harm a baby who is feeding and growing well. However, prolonged crying should not automatically be assumed to be colic, especially when there are changes in feeding, alertness, breathing, temperature, or wet diapers.

Sources

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