

Incisional Hernia Repair

What is an incisional hernia?

A hernia is a defect in the muscle layer of the abdominal wall and they commonly occur in the groin (inguinal and femoral hernia), at the belly button (umbilical hernia) or following previous abdominal surgery (incisional hernia).

Incisional hernias are not unusual following previous major surgery and are more likely to occur if the wound has been infected. Obesity is also a known predisposing factor. The commonest symptom is the presence of a lump in or around the scar from the previous operation. This may or may not be uncomfortable. The lump is caused by something from within the abdomen (bowel or a fatty apron called the omentum) coming through the muscle defect in the scar. It will be more prominent on coughing or straining. If nothing is done to correct the situation the hernia may gradually enlarge over time. The risk of strangulation (where bowel gets stuck in the hernia) is quite low for incisional hernias. Be reassured that there is no risk of bowel coming through the skin.

What can be done to treat an incisional hernia?

Incisional hernias can often be safely left untreated, as the risk of strangulation is low. However many patients find them uncomfortable or unsightly and prefer to have them dealt with. The options are:

- External support with a corset
- An open operation where the old scar is reopened and the defect repaired
- A keyhole operation

Open Surgery for Incisional Hernia

The surgeon will re-open the old scar and find the defect in the muscle layer. A repair is performed usually using a piece of artificial material made of a very strong nylon material (often referred to as mesh). This will be stitched in place around the edges of the defect and will provide the strength that the scar needs to keep the abdominal contents in place. Drains may need to be placed under the scar to extract any blood that may continue to ooze under the skin following the procedure. These will usually be removed within a day or two of surgery. Time in hospital depends on the size of the hernia and will be longer for very large defects. Typically

patients can expect to be in hospital for 2-3 days.

Light exercise (walking) can begin almost straight away following discharge but you should avoid any heavy activity such as digging in the garden or lifting weights at the gym for at least a month following surgery.

Keyhole (Laparoscopic) Surgery for Incisional Hernia

The operation is essentially the same as in the case of open surgery except that the mesh is attached from the inside of the abdominal cavity rather than the outside. This is done by making 3 or 4 small incisions (all 1cm or less) in the abdomen and after dissecting out the defect stapling the mesh in place. There is usually no need for a drain in the keyhole procedure.

Recovery tends to be quicker following keyhole surgery and there is usually less discomfort. Discharge from hospital is typically within 1-2 days following surgery.

Which operation is best?

There is no right answer to this and the operation that your surgeon recommends will depend on a number of factors. For instance very large incisional hernias can be difficult to repair using keyhole techniques.

What can go wrong?

All operations carry some risk. These risks can be divided into the risks of any operation and specific problems related to incisional hernia repair.

General complications include wound or chest infection, DVT (blood clots in the leg) and bleeding. Measures will be taken to minimise these risks, for example antibiotics to cover against infections will be given at the time of the operation.

Specific complications include bleeding under the skin (haematoma) which may need to be removed with a needle. Wound infection is more common with the open operation and if severe can result in the need to remove the mesh. Damage to structures within the hernia (eg bowel) can occur and is a serious, though rare, complication if not recognised and dealt with at the time. Damage to other structures within the abdominal cavity, such as blood vessels, can occur with any keyhole operation though the risk of this happening is small.

The hernia can recur at some point in the future (approximately 1 in 10) and there is no guarantee that the repair will last for life. Most patients who undergo an incisional hernia repair however have an uneventful postoperative recovery and a satisfactory long-term result.

Where can I get more information?

You can get more information by visiting www.keyholesurgery.net