

Biliary colic occurs when the bile ducts (cystic, hepatic ducts or common bile duct) are suddenly blocked by a gallstone. Slowly-progressing obstruction, as from a [tumor](#), does not cause biliary colic. Behind the obstruction, fluid accumulates and distends the ducts and gallbladder. In the case of hepatic duct or common bile duct obstruction, this is due to continued secretion of bile by the liver. In the case of cystic duct obstruction, the wall of the gallbladder secretes fluid into the gallbladder. It is the distention of the ducts or gallbladder that causes biliary colic.

Characteristically, biliary colic comes on suddenly or builds rapidly to a peak over a few minutes.

- It is a constant pain, it does not come and go, though it may vary in intensity while it is present.
- It lasts for 15 minutes to 4-5 hours. If the pain lasts more than 4-5 hours, it means that a complication - usually cholecystitis - has developed.
- The pain usually is severe, but movement does not make the pain worse. In fact, patients experiencing biliary colic often walk about or writhe (twist the body in different positions) in bed trying to find a comfortable position.
- Biliary colic often is accompanied by [nausea](#).
- Most commonly, biliary colic is felt in the middle of the upper abdomen just below the sternum.
- The second most common location for pain is the right upper abdomen just below the margin of the ribs.
- Occasionally, the pain also may be felt in the back at the lower tip of the scapula on the right side.
- On rare occasions, the pain may be felt beneath the sternum and is mistaken for [angina](#) or a [heart attack](#).
- An episode of biliary colic subsides gradually once the gallstone shifts within the duct so that it is no longer causing obstruction.

Biliary colic is a recurring symptom. Once the first episode occurs, there are likely to be other episodes. Also, there is a pattern of recurrence for each individual, that is, in some individuals the episodes tend to remain frequent while in others they are infrequent. The majority of people who develop biliary colic do not go on to develop cholecystitis or other complications.