Umbilical (Belly Button) Hernia

What is an umbilical hernia?
An umbilical hernia occurs when part of the intestine bulges into the belly button through a weak spot or hole in the wall of the belly (abdomen). Usually, this causes a small “outie” belly button. Sometimes the bulge is large. This kind of hernia is present soon after the umbilical cord falls off.

How can I tell if my child has an umbilical hernia?
An umbilical hernia is usually first noticed after the umbilical cord falls off the infant. You may notice it yourself, and your child’s regular primary care provider will be able to see or feel the hernia during regular check-ups. It is normal for the hernia to look larger and harder when your child is straining or crying, and smaller when they are resting or relaxing. A surgeon can examine your child’s belly to feel if a hernia is present. No special X-rays or tests are needed.

Will my child’s umbilical hernia go away?
Most umbilical hernias will go away by themselves over time and no treatment is needed. This may take 4 to 5 years. Your child’s primary care provider can continue to check its progress over time. During this time, it is normal for the hernia to change in size. Activities like running, crying, or straining for a bowel movement can make the hernia look larger.

How will my child feel with a hernia?
Most children will have no pain or other symptoms from the hernia.

When should I call my child’s doctor?
In very rare cases, the intestine can get trapped in the hole (hernia) at the belly button, and it may become blocked or cut off from blood flow. If this happens, your child may be in severe pain and have:

- Intestinal blockage
- Pain in the belly, mainly around the belly button
- Swelling or discoloration at site of the hernia
- Vomiting
- Fever

If your child has these symptoms, call your child’s healthcare provider or go to the emergency room. Your child may need emergency surgery.

To Learn More
- General Surgery 206-987-2794, option #4
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services
- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.
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### What is the treatment for umbilical hernia?

If the hernia has not gone away by itself by age 4 or 5 years, or if the opening in the belly is more than about an inch wide, then it will probably not close on its own. Your child’s primary care provider will refer you to see a surgeon to discuss surgery to repair it.

If the hernia does not go away and is never repaired, your child will have the hernia even as an adult. For adult women, the risk of the intestine being trapped increases during pregnancy. Pregnancy is a more dangerous time for a woman to have surgery. For this reason, it is recommended that children, especially girls, whose hernia has not closed by itself, have the surgery to fix it.

### How is an umbilical hernia repaired?

An umbilical hernia is usually repaired as a same-day, outpatient surgery at the hospital. Your child will be given medicine to make them sleep without pain (general anesthesia) during the surgery. The surgery is done through a very small, half-circle cut (incision) along a belly button skin crease. The surgeon will gently push the bulging tissue back into your child’s belly. Next, the surgeon will sew up the opening in the abdominal wall. Finally, the surgeon will close the incision. The incision is closed using dissolving stitches. These stitches cannot be seen from the outside, and they do not need to be removed.

### When should my child’s umbilical hernia be repaired?

If your child still has the hernia at age 4 to 5, or if the surgeon agrees that the size is so large it is not likely to close by itself, surgery should be scheduled. Usually the surgery can be planned for a convenient time when your child is healthy. Usually surgery can be done one to four weeks after the clinic visit with the surgeon.