Abdominal Pain — What Does It Mean?
Cramping. Nausea. Pain. When your stomach acts up, you want answers. Unfortunately, the source of abdominal pain is often elusive – there are many organs positioned in the abdomen that can be involved and a variety of factors that can lead to discomfort.

**UNSETTLING SYMPTOMS**

**Constipation** is one of the most common reasons for abdominal pain. If it has been a few days or more since your last bowel movement, consider taking a laxative or seeing your doctor if the pain or constipation continues.

**Diarrhea and vomiting** are often caused by an infection known as gastroenteritis, or the stomach flu. The stomach flu is also characterized by fever, aches, chills and nausea. Use fever-reducing medicines, get rest and stay hydrated to beat this bug. Don’t give children or teenagers aspirin without consulting your doctor, and seek medical treatment if an infant or young child shows signs of dehydration such as lethargy, dry mouth or decreased urination.

**Pain** can be assessed to help identify the source of the problem. If your pain is ongoing or acute, and not specifically related to the stomach flu or digesting food (heartburn, overeating, constipation, gas), it may be a sign of something more serious. According to John Moffat, MD, Otsego Memorial Hospital General Surgeon, “Pain lasting for more than six hours or that returns repeatedly should not be ignored.”

**ABDOMINAL AILMENTS**

**Appendicitis.** The appendix is a small pouch that projects from the colon on the lower right side of your abdomen. In children and adults, the appendix can become inflamed and filled with pus, requiring surgical removal. If not treated, the appendix can burst and lead to a serious infection. Symptoms include abdominal pain near the navel or lower right abdomen, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite and fever. Seek medical attention immediately if these warning signs are present.

**Kidney stones.** A kidney stone is a hard mass that develops when crystals separate from the urine in the urinary tract. Most kidney stones can be passed through the urinary system with plenty of fluids and pain medication. Kidney stones often cause pain that originates in the back, near the ribs, and moves down toward the groin. Symptoms include severe pain that comes and goes and blood in the urine.

**Gallstones.** A gallstone is formed when bile hardens in the gallbladder. If bile contains too much cholesterol or not enough bile salts, it can harden into stone-like material. Many people with gallstones have no symptoms, but some people experience gallstone attacks that often follow fatty meals and may occur at night. Treatment involves surgery for gallstone removal. Symptoms include steady pain in the upper abdomen, migrating pain between the shoulder blades or under the right shoulder, abdominal bloating, intolerance of fatty foods, belching and indigestion.

**LISTEN TO YOUR ABDOMEN**

According to Dr. Moffat, severe symptoms can be rapidly assessed and diagnosed through the OMH Emergency Department and the proper specialist consulted. For less severe symptoms, a scheduled office appointment with General Surgery is appropriate. They can coordinate all necessary investigations and recommend treatment options. The stomach, colon and kidneys send signals in the form of pain to get your attention — and so do the spleen, pancreas, gallbladder and appendix. The key is to pinpoint abdominal pain and the problems causing it so you can seek treatment and feel better.

To schedule an appointment with Dr. Moffat or his partners in practice, please contact the Otsego Memorial Hospital General Surgery office at (989) 731-7987.

John Moffat, MD, FACS, FRCS (C) has been a part of the OMH surgical team for more than five years, and has practiced and trained around the United States and Canada. He has extensive experience caring for a broad range of surgical problems, with a special focus on advanced minimally invasive procedures.