



Adhesions

Adhesions can be thought of as internal scars, strand like fibrous tissue that form an abnormal bond between two parts of the body. They most commonly form when the abdominal cavity is opened during a surgical operation, especially if a procedure has to be performed on the intestine.

Adhesions usually cause no trouble and their presence is unknown. However, an adhesion can restrict the movement of the intestine because the intestine (which is like a floppy tube) becomes kinked, twisted or restricted by an external band of scar tissue. As a result, passage of intestinal contents may be blocked at that point. This can lead to episodes of colicky pain, as the intestinal muscle contracts more strongly than usual to propel the contents through the narrowed segment. Other symptoms may be a sense of distension, nausea or vomiting, and an altered bowel habit. The blockage is usually partial but can be complete, in which case symptoms are more severe and admission to hospital is needed.

Investigation

The presence of adhesions is difficult to detect. An X-ray of the abdomen may suggest the presence of obstruction to the passage of intestinal contents. Even X-rays, which follow the progress of a substance such as barium through the bowel are often normal because they are performed when the intestine is empty. The only certain way of detecting adhesions is to look inside the abdominal cavity, either with a viewing instrument (laparoscope) or at operation.

Abdominal pain and altered bowel habit may be caused by many conditions, especially irritable bowel syndrome. Caution and investigation is needed before such symptoms are attributed to adhesions, and particularly before contemplating further surgery.

Treatment

Division of adhesions at operation can relieve the symptoms. However, new adhesions may form. Complex operations to prevent the intestine kinking are sometimes performed but such procedures do not always relieve symptoms and are reserved for particularly troublesome and extensive adhesions.

