Clinical Practice Guidelines:
Medical/Abdominal emergencies

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Clinical.Guidelines@ambulance.qld.gov.au

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Author: Clinical Quality & Patient Safety Unit, QAS
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Abdominal emergencies

Abdominal pain is a common symptom experienced by patients. It may be associated with transient disorders or serious disease. In the majority of presentations the cause is benign and/or self-limiting. However, many causes are time critical and may require urgent intervention.

This CPG deals with non-traumatic causes of abdominal emergencies; for trauma related abdominal emergencies please refer to CPG: Abdominal trauma.

Time critical abdominal emergencies include: [1,2,3]

- Ectopic pregnancy
- Ruptured abdominal aortic aneurism (AAA): dilation and rupturing of the aorta within the abdomen.
- Peritonitis and sepsis: Inflammation of the serosal membrane of the abdominal cavity usually caused by perforation of a visceral organ.
- Testicular/ovarian torsion: Causing interruption to vascular supply and ischaemic pain.
- Uncontrolled gastro intestinal tract (GIT) haemorrhage:
  - Upper GIT – oesophagus, stomach and duodenum
  - Lower GIT – small bowel and colon
- Acute bowel obstruction
- Acute pancreatitis

Clinical features

High risk:

- Age > 60 years
- Severe abdominal pain and/or tenderness suggestive of peritonism
- Altered VSS
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- History of haematemesis and/or melaena
- Female of child bearing age
- Elderly and paediatric patients

Risk Assessment

- Cardiac pain can mimic gastro-oesophageal reflux (indigestion).
- AAAs may masquerade as renal colic pain, especially in elderly patients.[4]
Additional information

- The target of fluid resuscitation in a dissecting and/or ruptured AAA, GI bleed or ruptured ectopic pregnancy is to maintain perfusion of vital organs. Radial pulse may be used as a marker of perfusion.[5,6,7]
- Patients with a dissecting AAA are usually in severe pain and require IV narcotic analgesia, which should not be delayed or withheld.[8]
- Cardiac ischaemia may present with abdominal pain, therefore ALL patients should have a 12-Lead ECG acquired and interpreted for risk stratification.
- The presence of normal vital signs does not preclude serious abdominal disease.
- The assessment of abdominal pain is complex and requires multi-modal investigation. In general, ALL patients with abdominal pain should be transported for further medical assessment.

Note: Officers are only to perform procedures for which they have received specific training and authorisation by the QAS.