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QUICK CURE

FOR HERNIAS

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One in ten people will be diagnosed with a hernia in their lifetime, and while sufferers once required a major operation and a six-week recovery, it is now easily treated in a 20-minute operation under local anaesthetic.

Surgeons in London have pioneered a revolutionary new treatment which means patients can be back at work within days.

Hernias, which are caused when part of the lower intestine breaks through the abdominal wall, are unsightly and, in some cases, lethal.

They are caused when the abdominal wall is put under undue stress by something such as lifting heavy objects, persistent coughing or straining with constipation.

Although hernias are uncomfortable, there's often no immediate pain. The first sign is the appearance of a soft bulge or lump in the groin, at the top of the leg or around the navel.

Once the wall is breached, the muscles won't knit back without treatment and the hernia usually keeps getting bigger.

If hernias are not treated, there's a risk they may become strangulated when the blood supply to the trapped intestine is cut off.

More than 300 people die every year from complications such as septicaemia. Sufferers are usually babies or men, but women are getting them in increasing numbers.

Until now doctors have treated hernias with an operation performed under general anaesthetic, when the intestines are pushed back into place, then the two sides are strengthened by stitching them together.

However, doctors at the British Hernia Centre in London have perfected a technique which involves only minor surgery.

'It's beautifully simple and the benefits are huge,' says clinic director Dudley Rogg. 'Instead of stitching the two sides of the abdominal wall together, we tuck a sterile piece of mesh at the hernial opening and the body does the rest.'

'The muscle and tendon sense the mesh is there and start producing their own fibrous growth to weave around the abdominal wall.'

'They literally repair themselves. It's completely tension and distortion-free. There are no stitches to pull apart. It works on the same basic principle as reinforcing concrete with steel.'

'There's no need to go carefully because there's no tension on the wound,' explains Mr Rogg. 'So the risk of the recurrence - which is very high with the traditional method - is minimal.'

'We encourage patients to climb the stairs immediately and we've even had some on an exercise bike within 40 minutes.'

Surgeons operate on only half the number of hernia patients as in comparable countries such as the U.S.

And many GPs, aware of long waiting lists and the problems of recuperation, recommend that patients tolerate their hernias unless they are actually life-threatening.

'Treating a hernia has always been like playing Russian Roulette,' says Mr Rogg. 'The traditional treatment carried its own risks.'

For example, a proportion of men develop scar tissue around the scrotum after the operation, which can lead to an atrophied testicle.

'Not surprisingly many sufferers simply decided to live with their hernias rather than endure a serious operation.'

The centre is privately run, but takes referrals from the NHS, where hernia operations account for one in six of all nongynaecological operations. Operations cost £895.

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