Diagnostic Images

Gallstone ileus

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The patient

A markedly obese woman age 63 was admitted as an emergency with vomiting, colicky abdominal pain and not passing flatus for 4 days. The pain was in the right hypochondrium, radiating across the epigastrium but not into the back. On examination the abdomen was soft and distended with increased bowel sounds.

Figure 1 Plain film of the abdomen. There is gas in the bile duct (arrow) with a 'featureless' or 'no gas' appearance indicating fluid filled small bowel and an empty colon.

Figure 2 Enlarged view of the right hypochondrial region showing the gas in the common bile duct (arrow).

Figure 3 Small bowel enema outlining a large gallstone at the site of obstruction in the jejunum.

Figure 4 After withdrawal of the tube into the third part of the duodenum the common bile duct, cystic duct (black arrow), and contracted gall bladder (white arrow) have been demonstrated.

Comment

Small bowel obstruction is diagnosed on plain film either by dilated loops of small bowel containing gas or by the 'gasless' appearance in a patient who is vomiting. The colon appears empty. Erect films showing fluid levels are in the vast majority of cases non-contributory.

Gas in the biliary ducts or gall bladder occurs in two thirds of patients with gallstone ileus and in one third the gallstone is visible in the plain film. In the UK most surgeons will operate without further investigations but occasionally, as in very obese patients, knowing the exact site of the obstruction can be extremely helpful.

A small bowel enema in these circumstances is more rapid and displays the lesion more precisely as in this patient. The gallstone invariably enters the small bowel through a fistula between the gall bladder and duodenum as was shown at operation in this patient. Following removal of the gallstone there was an uneventful recovery.

Reference

BERK, R.N. & CLEMETT, A.R. (1977). In *Radiology of the Gall Bladder and Bile Ducts*, chapter 1. pp. 27–36. W.B. Saunders: Philadelphia.

Errata

Volume 61, No. 713, March 1985.

Book Reviews, page 279. The price of 'Dermatology Revision: MCQs, Case Histories and Picture Interpretation' by S.K. Goolamali (published by Churchill Livingstone) was given as £37.95. This should have been £7.95.

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The captions to Figures 2 and 3 in the paper 'Gallstone ileus' by L. Kreel, pp. 511–512, were reversed. We apologise for this error.