

How having an Abdominal Wall Hernia (AWH) can affect your Mental Health

Information for patients, relatives and carers

ⓘ For more information, please contact:

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Introduction

An abdominal wall hernia (AWH) is a physical health condition where a bulge develops in the abdomen, which can affect your quality of life and mental health. This leaflet describes some challenges of living with an AWH and offers guidance on finding support.

An AWH affects people in different ways. For some, it may impact their mental health. For others, it may affect their body image (how they see their body or how they believe others see it). For some people, it can affect their relationships, such as how they connect with others. This leaflet explores these different effects and provides practical suggestions for coping strategies.

How can living with an AWH influence body image and self-esteem?

An AWH can change the way people see themselves and their body image. Many people with an AWH feel unhappy with changes in how their body looks because of the condition. It is common to feel scared, worried or concerned about how other people see or judge their body.

When other people misunderstand why a person's body has changed, it can make some people feel ashamed or embarrassed. This might lead to changes in someone's behaviour, such as wearing clothes to hide their body or avoiding social situations.

Body Image

Changes to perceptions of self:

- Frustration.
- Dissatisfaction with appearance.
- Negative self-image.
- Loss of bodily control.
- Feeling "different".
- Struggling with self-confidence.
- Feeling unattractive or "damaged".

Fears concerning others' perception of them:

- Embarrassment in public.
- Fear of judgment.
- Loneliness from avoiding social situations.
- Awkward social interactions.
- Avoiding social situations.
- Fear of not fitting in.
- Concern over how loved ones view them.

How can living with an AWH influence relationships?

People with an AWH may sometimes feel lonely and disconnected from the person they used to be. People cope with this in different ways. Some find it helpful to talk about their AWH with others. This can provide support and help them find solutions. However, some people with an AWH may avoid social interactions. This can happen because of anxiety or loss of confidence. This can affect how close they feel to others.

It is common for an AWH to affect both social and sexual relationships. Changes in body image, discomfort, and feeling self-conscious can make it harder to spend time with others or feel close to a partner. Pain can also make physical intimacy difficult or less enjoyable. Some people lose confidence, worry about being rejected, or find it difficult to talk about their needs. Others may feel guilty about how their condition affects their loved ones. Talking openly with a partner and seeking support can help people manage these challenges and stay connected in their relationships.

Interpersonal relationships

Difficulty Socially Connecting:

- Feeling isolated.
- Anxiety in social settings.
- Reduced self-esteem.
- Loss of belonging.
- Difficulty communicating.
- Perceived loss of support network.
- Depression.
- Social withdrawal.

Changes to Sexual Relations:

- Reduced intimacy.
- Fear of rejection.
- Loss of confidence.
- Altered sexual experiences.
- Guilt or shame.
- Avoidance of physical closeness.
- Reduced sexual activity.
- Concerns about body image.

What emotional responses are common when living with an AWH?

People can feel different emotions at different stages of their treatment. All feelings and emotions are normal and valid. Everyone will have different feelings about their diagnosis. Feelings and emotions can change over time.

The emotional challenge of living with an AWH may lead to periods of hopelessness, low mood or depression.

For example:

- An AWH can make it physically harder to do the things a person enjoys. This might mean it is harder to do things like working, hobbies, or spending time with family and friends. Not being able to do these things can make someone see themselves differently. It might make them feel like they have lost who they used to be or the life they used to have. People might feel disconnected or hopeless. It might lead to feeling low in mood.
- Dealing with an AWH can be slow, with many setbacks or challenges. These setbacks can make you feel frustrated or hopeless about the future.
- Living with physical pain, limited movement, and balance problems can be hard.

The emotional challenge of living with an AWH may cause worry, anxiety, or fear. For example:

- It is common for people with an AWH to feel anxiety about the risk of complications. This can lead to worries about doing everyday tasks in life.
- Feeling self-conscious about body image and the physical restrictions of an AWH can lead people to step back from their usual activities. Over time, this can make it even more anxiety-provoking to do activities of daily living.
- Thinking about management or treatment options can lead to anxiety. This might include worries about the potential risks of complex abdominal wall reconstruction surgery (CAWR) or the future of the condition.
- Anxiety can be linked to body image concerns and fear of judgement from others.

Emotional Responses

Psychological and Emotional Distress:

- Anxiety about risks or daily tasks.
- Depression or low mood.
- Frustration.
- Hopelessness.
- Fear of complications or future.
- Body image concerns.
- Feeling overwhelmed by setbacks.
- Physical pain causing emotional strain.

Identity Disruption:

- Loss of self-identity.
- Feeling disconnected from others.
- Changes in family or social roles.
- Perceived loss of the life they used to have.
- Difficulty maintaining relationships.
- Struggling to recognize their former self.
- Challenges in redefining their identity.
- Loss of confidence in social and work settings.

Guilt and Self-Blame

Living with an AWH can lead to feelings of guilt or self-blame. This can especially be the case for those with young families or grandchildren. Many people feel guilty about how their condition might affect their loved ones, such as being unable to take part fully in family activities or feeling like they are letting others down. These feelings are normal but can be emotionally difficult to cope with.

Some people may also blame themselves for their condition or for not being able to do everything they used to do. This can lead to frustration, anger, or sadness. It is important to remember that an AWH is a medical condition. It is not something caused by personal fault or choice.

Understanding new information

With an AWH, there can be a lot of new information to take in. Your medical team will talk you through the details of your illness and the options for long-term management. This might include different steps in managing your hernia. It might include surgery as an option, lifestyle changes, or things to expect in the future.

It can be difficult to process information when emotions are running high. Some people find it helpful to bring a friend or relative to appointments to help ask questions and remember the details. Taking away written information can also be helpful. Everyone is different when it comes to taking in new information.

At first, you might only want to know what is necessary, so you do not feel overwhelmed. Or, you might want to learn as much as possible to feel more in control. It is important to talk to your medical team about how you are feeling. This helps them support you in managing and living with your AWH. They may ask you to write down your thoughts and feelings.

Coping with an AWH in the long term

Over time, most people start to adjust emotionally to their AWH. This can mean different things to different people. For example, some people have a hernia related to a stoma (where there is a surgically created opening in the abdominal wall). Usually, it means finding ways to live with an AWH without it getting in the way of the things that are most important in life.

This could include making lifestyle changes or finding ways to handle the physical and emotional challenges. It could also mean talking about medical options for treatment.

Coping strategies:

- Learn about your condition.
- Set realistic goals.
- Create a routine.
- Maintain physical activity.
- Engage in things you value.
- Increase relaxation.
- Write it down.
- Talk to others.
- Be kind to yourself.

How coping strategies can help:

- Understanding your condition can help you feel informed and empowered.
- Breaking big tasks into smaller steps can increase your sense of control.
- Establishing a regular schedule can bring structure and make life feel more manageable.
- Engaging in low impact exercise such as walking can help improve mood and lower stress.
- Noticing what you can still do and engaging in meaningful activities can help maintain purpose.
- Using techniques like deep breathing or mindful meditation can reduce stress.
- Keeping a journal can help to express feelings and notice patterns of thinking or behaviour.
- Sharing your feelings with family and friends or joining a support group can increase feelings of connection.
- Treating yourself with patience and compassion during tough times can be vital in avoiding the negative impact of self-criticism.

Where can I go for more information and support?

Living with an AWH can, at times, feel emotionally demanding. It can help to talk about how you are feeling with people you trust, like family or close friends. You can also talk about how you are feeling and coping with your diagnosis with your GP or a member of your care team at York Abdominal Wall Unit.

Some people with an AWH find it helpful to connect with others through online hernia support groups. Some of these can be found on social media platforms such as Facebook. These groups are independent communities where people share experiences and advice. As they are not affiliated with the NHS, information shared should be considered alongside guidance from healthcare professionals.

British Hernia Society www.britishherniasociety.org

European Hernia Society
<https://europeanherniasociety.eu/patient-area/>

The NHS Website provides further helpful information about stress, anxiety and depression. Self-help tips and support to improve mental health can also be found on the website: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/>

If you feel you would benefit from psychological support, you may consider a referral to the NHS Talking Therapies Service. A referral can be made by your general practitioner. Alternatively, you self-refer to your local NHS Talking Therapies Service:
<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service/>

Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:
York Abdominal Wall Unit, phone 01904 721154.
York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE.

Teaching, training and research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net.

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

If you would like this information in a different format, including braille or easy read, or translated into a different language, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department providing your care.

Patient Information Leaflets can be accessed via the Trust's Patient Information Leaflet website:

www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/

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