

Case 83 A lump at the umbilicus



Figure 83.1

This 62-year-old, rather overweight man presented with a lump at the umbilicus. It was first noted 3 years previously and has slowly got larger. Initially it disappeared when he lay down and was only obvious to him after he got up and walked about. However, in the last few months he has noticed it is there all the time. It has remained painless.

What is this called? Full and correct title please!

The correct title for this is a paraumbilical hernia; these occur just above or just below the umbilicus and not

through it. These herniae are commoner in females than males and they tend to occur in obese and multiparous women.

What, then, is an umbilical hernia?

This is quite a common finding in newborn babies, especially in Black children. It results from a defect in the umbilical scar, which bulges rather alarmingly when the baby cries. This looks frightening but in fact the great majority of these defects close spontaneously by the end of the first year. Surgery is only indicated in the rare cases when this does not occur.

To return to our adult patient, palpation of the lump revealed a rather soft nodular mass, which could not be reduced and did not enlarge on coughing. It was not tender to touch.

What further information do these findings give you about the hernia?

The hernia content is almost certainly greater omentum, hence its nodular feel. It is the commonest viscus to find its way into the sac of this type of hernia. Larger paraumbilical herniae often also contain transverse colon, with or without loops of small intestine. The hernia cannot be reduced; the contents have become adherent to the peritoneal lining of the sac. The absence of pain, tenderness or signs of bowel obstruction exclude strangulation.

Patients with this condition should be strongly advised to have the hernia repaired electively – why?

With its narrow neck, a paraumbilical hernia, like the femoral hernia of Case 82 (p. 167), is at considerable risk of strangulation, with danger, if unrelieved, of gangrene of its contents.