

# CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

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## June is National Hernia Awareness Month

No doubt fans of the New England Patriots were disappointed when quarterback Tom Brady failed to play in the Pro Bowl on February 12<sup>th</sup>. But Tom had other plans – he underwent surgery to repair a hernia in mid-February.

Brady was smart. He was among the 700,000 Americans who seek treatment for a hernia every year. Unfortunately, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, approximately 5 million Americans experience the pain caused by a hernia, but many fail to get treatment because they are afraid of having the surgery or worry about a long recuperation period afterward. However, modern medical advances have greatly reduced both the risks associated with hernia surgery as well as the recovery time. Even though it was expected to take 6 to 8 weeks for Brady to fully recover, he participated in a golf tournament in Florida on February 22<sup>nd</sup>. Patriots fans will be relieved to know he will be completely healed and ready to play football again in time for training camp.

But exactly what is a hernia? Briefly, a hernia occurs when a piece of an internal tissue or organ slips through a tear or opening in the surrounding tissue, thereby protruding beyond its normal boundary. Hernias can occur in anyone at any age. The most common types are hernias in the groin or abdominal wall. However, hernias can also occur in the esophagus (hiatal hernia), the navel (umbilical hernia), and the thigh (femoral hernia), as well as other places in the body.

Some people are at greater risk of developing a hernia than others. Those who strain while performing chronic lifting activities, people with chronic constipation, and people who are obese are more likely to develop a hernia at some point in their lives. Other risk factors include chronic coughing, pregnancy, and persistent sneezing. These risks may be reduced by maintaining a healthy weight, not smoking, exercising to strengthen abdominal muscles, eating high-fiber foods, drinking lots of water, and getting medical treatment for chronic constipation, allergies, or chronic cough.

Anyone with a suspected hernia should see a doctor. Signs of a hernia include visible bulging, pain (both at the site of the hernia as well as pain referred to other locations in the body), nausea, vomiting, urinary symptoms, and constipation. With the exception of some umbilical hernias in newborns, hernias do not go away by themselves. They only worsen if left untreated. An untreated hernia that is stuck outside its natural boundary is called an incarcerated hernia, which can become strangulated. When this happens, the blood supply is cut off and intolerable pain results.

After a doctor performs an examination of a hernia, a number of treatment options are considered. If a hernia is considered “reducible,” a supportive elastic band or garment called a truss can be used to keep the hernia from protruding, but it does not heal the hernia. However, surgery is the only treatment that is normally required. Over ½ million hernia operations are performed yearly in the United States. Traditional surgery involves making a larger incision to move the hernia back to its normal location, then suturing the surrounding tissue to close the opening and strengthen the wall. Laparoscopic surgery involves a smaller incision in which instruments are placed and used to repair the hernia. Less recovery time is needed with laparoscopy, but both methods can usually be done on an out-patient basis, with no

overnight stay at the hospital required.

While it is true some people live with the pain of a hernia for weeks or even longer, a hernia can be life-threatening, especially if it becomes strangulated. To learn more about the various types of hernia and treatment options, contact the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics at 1-800-777-8442 ([www.uihealthcare.com](http://www.uihealthcare.com)), the American Medical Association's medical library at [www.medem.com](http://www.medem.com), or the North Penn Hernia Institute at 1-215-368-1122 ([www.hernia.tripod.com](http://www.hernia.tripod.com)). For additional information about other public health concerns, call the Central Connecticut Health District at 721-2824 ([www.ccthd.org](http://www.ccthd.org)).