Chap. XXIII. Of Hernia.

Sect. I. *Of Hernia in general.*

The name of *hernia* might with propriety be applied to every swelling occaſioned by the diſlodgment of parts from thoſe boundaries within which, in a ſtate of health, they are contained ; but the general acceptation of the term im­plies a tumor produced by the protruſion of ſome part or parts from the cavity of the abdomen.

The parts in which herniæ uſually appear are the groin, ſcrotum, labia pudendi, the upper and fore part of the thigh, the umbilicus, and different points between the interstices of the abdominal muſcles. If the ſituation of such tu­mors be various, the viſcera which produce them are ſtill more ſo ; inſtances having occurred of the ſtomach, uterus, liver, spleen, and bladder, being found to form their con­tents. But a part of the inteſtinal canal, or a portion of the omentum, are from experience known to be the moſt fre­quent cause of their formation.

From theſe circumſtances of ſituation and contents, all the different appellations are derived by which herniæ are diſtinguiſhed. Thus they are termed *inguinal, scrotal, femo­ral, umbilical,* and *ventral ;* from their appearing in the groin, ſcrotum, thigh, navel, or belly. When the tumor is confined to the groin, the hernia is ſaid to be incomplete, and is termed *bubonocele ;* but when the ſwelling reaches down to the bottom of the ſcrotum, the rupture is then ſupposed to be complete, and the diſeaſe obtains the name of *ſcrotal rupture,* or *oschiocele.*

Of theſe diſorders the inguinal hernia is by much the moſt frequent ; next to that is the femoral. The umbilical is ſel­dom obſerved in men, or even in women who have not born children.

The cauſes which tend to the production of hernia in its more uſual form are theſe :

I. The containing parts of the abdomen we know to be elaſtic and compreſſible ; whatever, therefore, tends to pro­duce a diminution of capacity in the cavity of the abdomen, muſt occaſion a proportional degree of riſk of ſome of the contained parts being puſhed from their natural situations. Violent coughing, crying, laughter, or great bodily exer­tion, are attended with more or leſs contraction of the ab­dominal muſcles, and particularly of the diaphragm ; and as the contraction of theſe muſcles muſt always diminiſh the ab­dominal cavity, theſe cauſes therefore are frequently found to be productive of hernia.

II. Falls, in conſequence of the derangement they pro­duce in the abdominal viſcera, from the ſudden and violent ſhock with which they are often attended, are not unfrequently the immediate cauſes of hernia.

III. Perſons of a preternatural laxity of frame are very liable to herniæ. The containing parts of the abdomen, from the want of a ſufficient tone and firmneſs, are unable in ſuch people to resist on all occaſions the weight of the diffe­rent viſcera ; and they are therefore more particularly exposed to diſorders of this kind on the ſlighteſt application of any of the cauſes already mentioned.

IV. Sprains are apt to induce a laxity of the part injured; and have therefore a ſimilar influence in inducing herniæ with general laxity.

V. It has been obſerved that the people of thoſe countries where oil is much uſed as an article of diet, are particularly liable to herniæ.

In whatever parts the parietes of the abdomen happen to be weakeſt, theſe various cauſes will moſt readily operate in producing herniæ ; and accordingly we find, that deſcents of the bowels usually occur only in ſuch parts.

In whatever ſituation a protruſion of any portion of the inteſtines occurs, except in the caſe of the hernia congenita, as all the viſcera are contained within the peritonæam, a portion of that membrane, it is evident, muſt be carried down together with the parts protruded ; and it eve­ry such inſtance, it is this portion of the peritonæum which goes down along with the gut, that is termed the *hernial ſac.* The ſize of this ſac is various in different subjects, and in different ſtages of the ſame diſorder. On the first appear­ance of the diſeaſe, it is commonly of no very conſiderable ſize, as such ſwellings ſeldom acquire any great bulk at once : but by repeated deſcents of the bowels, it comes to be puſhed lower and lower, till in ſome inſtances its bulk becomes very conſiderable indeed ; and when in this advanced period of the diſorder the ſac happens to be laid open, it is found to contain either large quantities of omentum or inteſtine, and frequently large portions of each. As the peritonæum has this property in common with many other parts of the body, of thickening according to the degree of any gradual extenſion applied to it, so in ma­ny inſtances the thickneſs and firmneſs of the hernial ſac are often really aſtoniſhing.

All the bad ſymptoms which are found to occur in her­niæ, proceed, as may be readily ſuppoſed, either from ob­ſtruction to the paſſage of the feces when the inteſtinal ca­nal forms the tumor, or from a ſtoppage of circulation oc­caſioned by ſtricture on the prolapſed parts : so that the at­tending ſymptoms, it is evident, will be always more or leſs hazardous according to the nature of the parts ſo protru­ded.

Thus, when omentum alone forms the ſubſtance of her­nial ſwellings, as that organ does not appear to be ſo imme­diately neceſſary for life as many of the other viſcera, such tumors accordingly are not ſo frequently productive of bad conſequences, at leaſt they are ſeldom in any degree ſo ha­zardous as when a part of the alimentary canal is either pro­truded by itſelf or along with omentum.

Although this, however, is in general the caſe, yet it does ſometimes happen, that even an omental rupture is pro­ductive of no ſmall degree of danger. When a ſtricture so complete upon it occurs as to occaſion a ſtoppage of circu­lation in the protruded part, mortification with all its bad conſequences muſt be the certain event : And beſides, the connection between the omentum, ſtomach, and other viſce­ra, is ſuch, that a ſudden descent of any conſiderable portion of the former ſometimes brings on vomiting, hickup, and other troublesome ſymptoms : And laſtly, although a rup­ture containing omentum only ought not of itſelf produce any thing bad ; yet as the paſſage through which the omen­tum has slipped muſt of neceſſity continue open ſo long as that viſcus remains protruded, and as that circumſtance alone muſt, ſo long as it continues, render it more eaſy for a por­tion of gut likewiſe to get down, this of itſelf is a ſufficient reaſon for intitling even this ſpecies of hernia to the ſerious attention of practitioners.

But whatever the contents of ſuch ſwellings may be, as their remaining in ſome inſtances for a conſiderable length of time without being productive of any bad ſymptoms, muſt proceed entirely from the circulation continuing to go freely on, notwithſtanding the derangement of parts ; so, whenever a ſtricture occurs up the protruded viſcera, ſuf­ficient to produce either a ſtoppage of the circulation, or of the fecal contents of the alimentary canal, when a por­tion of gut forms the diſeaſe, the following in general are the ſymptoms which accrue.

An elaſtic colourleſs ſwelling is obſerved at the part affec­ted ; a flight pain is felt not only in the ſwelling itſelf, but, if part of the alimentary canal is down, an univerſal un-