

Exercises for improving bowel control

There are many different reasons why you may develop faecal leakage or incontinence. Whatever the reason, having a problem controlling your bowels can be upsetting. This fact sheet describes exercises which may help you regain control.

How defecation (opening your bowels) works

There are two rings of muscle wrapped around the anus. These are called 'sphincters'. When a stool comes into the rectum one of the muscles relaxes and allows the stool to enter the anus. Very sensitive nerves in the anus can tell you if it is gas or stool waiting to come out. If it is stool, you squeeze the second muscle to stop it from coming straight out. The squeezing moves the stool back into the rectum, where it waits until you get to the toilet.

You may not be able to squeeze enough to hang on if:

- your muscles are weak
- they do not squeeze in the correct order
- the nerve supply to the muscles is damaged.

You may also feel the need to rush to the toilet and may leak gas, liquid or solid stool.

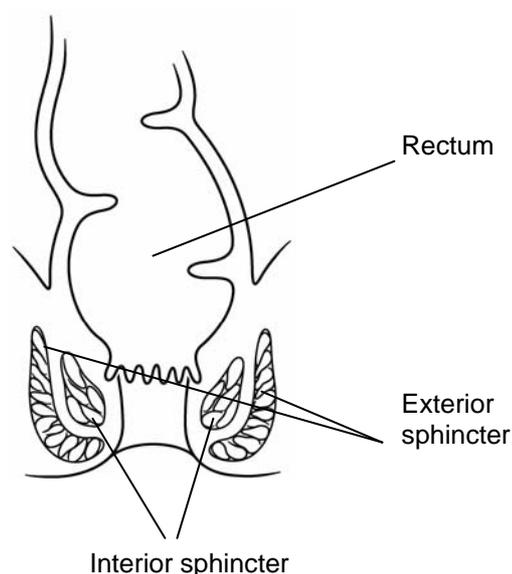
A programme for regaining control of your bowel

If you have had the distressing experience of a bowel accident in public, you will have become very sensitive to the feeling of any stool arriving in your rectum. It is a natural reaction to try and prevent an accident by immediately trying to find a toilet.

Your rectum, your sphincter muscles and your confidence need retraining to help you overcome this problem. There are exercises, which may help you get back control of your bowels. There are also some medicines which may help, if necessary. Most people find that their emotions have an influence on their bowels. If you are worried or anxious it can lead to more frequent, more urgent and looser bowel actions. If you panic when your bowel is full, this can cause the sense of urgency to become even stronger. The more you panic, the more you need to open your bowels.

Some people attempt to hold on, tense all their muscles and hold their breath. Doing this, however, raises the pressure in your tummy and rectum. It may then be more likely that your bowel will open. Relaxing and breathing normally, helps hold stool in.

While you are rushing to the toilet it is very difficult to concentrate on hanging on. You may do better to sit or stand still, breathe deeply and contract your anal sphincter long enough for the urge to wear off.



You may not be able to do this at first. If the urge is too strong, start by trying to delay bowel emptying once you are sitting on the toilet. See how long you can wait until you really have to let go.

If you practice holding on, and combine this with sphincter exercises (see below), you should find that eventually it gets easier. The longer you can hold on, the more fluid is absorbed from the stools and so the firmer and less urgent they become. If you are having two or three bowel actions in quick succession in the morning, you may eventually be able to hang on to the first ones, and have just one large bowel action all at once. When you have some successes, you will become more confident and panic less. The less you panic, the easier it is to make the urge go away.

Next time when you need to have your bowels open:

1. Sit on the toilet and hold on for as long as you can before opening your bowels. If you can only manage a few seconds, don't worry, it will gradually get easier. You might find it easier if you try to relax and concentrate on breathing very calmly. Gradually try to hold on for longer and longer each time. Don't worry if you're not able to do this for the first few times but keep practising.
2. It may be helpful to take something with you to read. Remember to concentrate on relaxed and calm breathing.
3. Once you are able to delay opening your bowels for a few minutes sitting on the toilet, the unpleasant urge to go then disappears. Get up and leave the toilet. Return a few minutes later when there is no urge and try to have your bowels open.
4. Gradually you will find that you can increase the distance and time away from the toilet. This may take some time. The more practise you have at both your sphincter exercises and this programme, the sooner it will happen.

Learning to do sphincter exercises

Exercises can strengthen these muscles so that they give support again. This will improve your bowel control and improve or stop leakage of gas or stool. Like any other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger they will be.

It is important to learn to do these exercises correctly, and to check from time to time that you are still doing them properly.

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Now imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from your bowel. To do this you must squeeze the muscle around your back passage. Try squeezing and lifting that muscle as tightly as you can, as if you are really worried that you are about to leak. You should be able to feel the muscle move. Your buttocks, tummy and legs should not move much at all. You should be aware of the skin around your back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from your chair. You should not need to hold your breath when you tighten these muscles.

Now imagine that your sphincter muscle is a lift. When you squeeze as tightly as you can your lift goes up to the fourth floor. But you cannot hold it there for very long, and it will not get you safely to the toilet as the muscle will get tired very quickly. So now squeeze more gently and take your lift only up to the second floor. Feel how much longer you can hold it than at the maximum squeeze.

Sphincter exercises

1. Sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart. Tighten and pull up your sphincter muscles as tightly as you can. Hold tightened for at least five seconds and then relax for at least 10 seconds. Repeat at least five times. This will work on the strength of your muscles.
2. Pull the muscles up to about half of their maximum squeeze. See how long you can hold this. Then relax for at least 10 seconds. Repeat at least five times. This will work on the endurance or staying power of your muscles.
3. Pull up the muscles as quickly and tightly as you can and then relax and then pull up again. See how many times you can do this before you get tired. Try for at least five quick pull-ups.
4. Do these three exercises at least 10 times every day.

As the muscles get stronger, you will find that you can hold for longer than five seconds, and that you can do more pull-ups each time without the muscles getting tired.

It takes time for exercise to make muscle stronger. You may need to exercise regularly for several months before the muscles gain their full strength.

Helpful suggestions

- At first it is probably a good idea to set aside some time for these exercises and concentrate on getting them right. They should become easy to do wherever you are quite soon. Nobody need know what you are doing!
- Get into the habit of doing your exercises with the things you do regularly and often.
- If you are unsure that you are exercising the right muscle, put a finger on your anus as you squeeze, to check. You should feel a gentle lift and squeeze if you are exercising the right muscle. Or, look at the area in a mirror. You should see your anus pucker up as you squeeze it.
- Remember that you cannot hold your tightest squeeze for very long, so you are better to use a gentle squeeze that you can hold for longer. Your control will gradually improve.
- Once you have regained control of your bowel, don't forget your exercises. Continue to do them a few times each day to make sure that the problem does not come back.

Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns about the information in this fact sheet you can contact:

A member of your medical team on:.....

Or

Your clinical nurse specialist on:.....