

Improving the way your bowel works - for people with constipation

Introduction

Many people have a regular time when they tend to open their bowels. But bowel routines can change for many reasons:

- a response to stress
- an irregular lifestyle
- a change in diet following an operation
- certain medications
- a fear of pain on passing a stool
- after pelvic radiotherapy.

Opening your bowels (passing a stool) involves a series of coordinated muscle movements in your colon, rectum, pelvis and anus (bottom). A change in the way the nerves and muscles in any of these areas work can interrupt the normal sequence of events and lead to difficulty in having a normal bowel action.

How does the bowel work?

The main function of the bowel is to extract nutrition from the food we eat and then process the waste efficiently. The waste matter is propelled by muscles in the wall of the bowel until it reaches the end of the bowel (the rectum) as a formed stool. When the rectum becomes full we start to feel the urge to open our bowel.

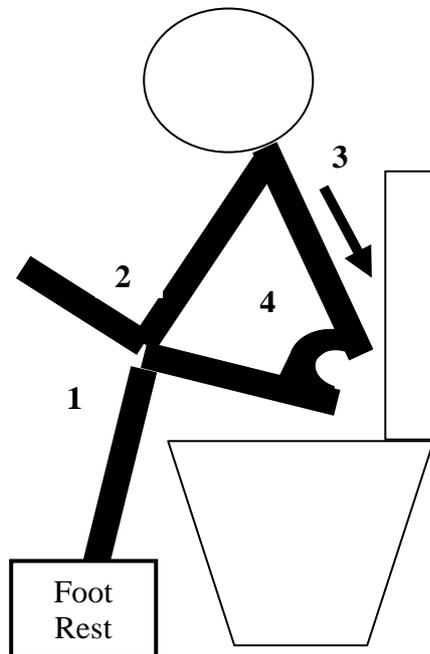
For the bowel to open we need to first increase the pressure within the abdomen and we do this by tensing our abdominal muscles and our diaphragm. Then, the muscles in the pelvis and around the bottom have to relax in a coordinated way so that the anus starts to open and finally the rectal muscles must squeeze the contents out. As the rectal muscles squeeze tightly, the rectum becomes shorter and more vertical also helping to move the contents out.

Learning to control your bowel movements

If you struggle to have your bowels open, the suggestions in this leaflet may help you. We suggest you try the brace technique. It may be difficult to do at first. Bowel control is a complex process, involving delicate co-ordination of many different nerves and muscles. However, if these nerves and muscles are not coordinating properly, retraining them can be very successful. Muscles respond well to regular training. So, try to set aside ten minutes at the same time each day to practice this on the lavatory and over a few weeks you will find having your bowel open becomes easier. Usually, muscle training works best if you can set aside a regular time each day to do it. Choose a time when you will not be rushed or interrupted.

The brace technique helps in getting the bowel to open more easily. In the picture below, you will see how to position yourself on the toilet to help the bowel do its work. The brace

technique mimics the natural squatting position and helps evacuation because it alters the angle of the rectum, making it easier to push and move the stool on into the anal canal from where it is evacuated.



The brace position

1. Knees higher than hips
2. Lean forward and put elbows on your knees
3. Relax shoulders
4. Bulge out your abdomen

What is the brace technique?

1. Sitting on the toilet, lean forward with your forearms resting on your thighs and raise your feet eight to 10 inches off the floor. You could use a foot stool or place two or three books under each foot.
2. Relax and lower your shoulders. Breathe slowly, regularly and gently – do not hold your breath as this will encourage you to strain. Try and stay as relaxed as you can.
3. Try and brace your abdominal muscles. This is best done by putting your hands on your waist. Expand your waist and feel your hands being pushed out sideways. Concentrate on relaxing your anus to allow the stool to pass. Only push down from above once your anus is relaxed.
4. Relax very slightly for one second maintaining pressure but without the push.
5. Then brace outwards and push down again.

Repeat steps one to five being careful to relax and use the correct technique. Do not spend endless time in the toilet. Do not strain – try again the next day. Excessive straining uses the wrong muscles and doesn't help the evacuating process.

Other suggestions which may help

A healthy lifestyle helps maintain a regular bowel habit:

- Drink eight to 10 glasses of fluid a day
- Eat regular meals which contain some fibre
- Gentle exercise, such as walking, can help maintain a regular bowel routine

Exercises to improve the way the pelvic muscles work

How can exercises help?

Exercises can strengthen these muscles so that they give support and are better coordinated. Like any other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger they will be.

Learning to do the exercises

It is important to learn to do the exercises in the right way, and to check from time to time that you are still doing them correctly.

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Now imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from the bowel. To do this you must squeeze the muscle around the 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. Really try to feel this. You should not need to hold your breath when you tighten the muscles.

Now imagine that the muscle which you are squeezing 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 as it gets tired very quickly. So now squeeze more gently, take your lift only up to the second floor. Feel how much longer you can hold it than at the maximum squeeze. Now try the following exercises:

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

Tips to help you

- At first it is probably a good idea to set aside some time for these exercises and really concentrate on getting them right. But quite soon they should become easy to do wherever you are. Nobody need know what you are doing!
- Get into the habit of doing your exercises with 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.
- Even when things are better, don't forget your exercises. Continue to do them a few times each day to ensure that the problem does not come back.

Remember it will take time for your bowel to learn a new routine. Keep practicing frequently and regularly.

Contact details

If you have any questions about this information, you can contact:

Dr. Andreyev's Office on 020 7811 8216