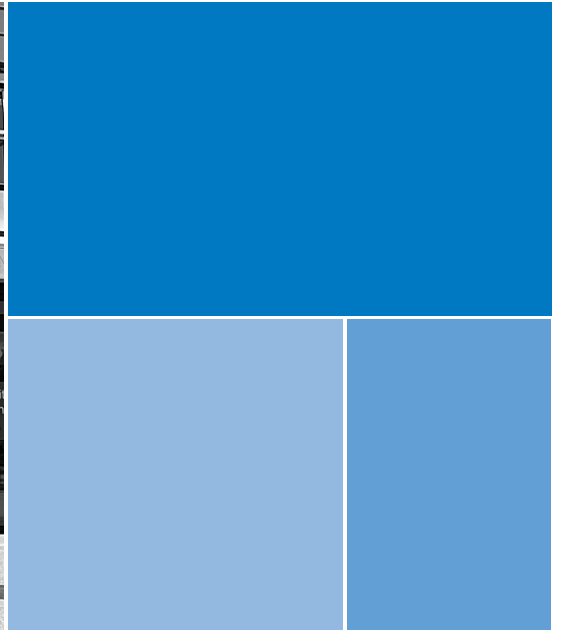




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NHS Foundation Trust

Pelvic Health Physiotherapy Bowel Control Exercises



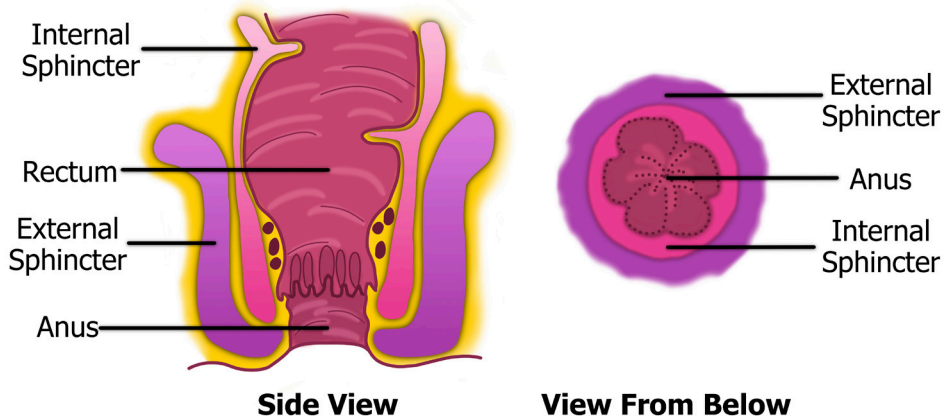
[Patient Information](#)

Introduction

Many people suffer with bowel symptoms such as leakage of stool, liquid or wind. You may experience urgency to get to the toilet, or difficulty wiping clean after opening your bowels. Exercising your pelvic floor muscles can help to improve these symptoms. These muscles are made up of several different layers or 'components'. Each component has a slightly different job to do. The components this leaflet focuses on are your anal sphincter muscles.

These muscles are called your internal and external anal sphincters. They form two rings around the back passage (anus). The internal sphincter is 'involuntary' - we have no control over it. It should remain closed at all times, only relaxing and opening when you open your bowels. This is an automatic action that we do not need to think about.

The external sphincter is a voluntary muscle, so we can control it. We tighten up this muscle when we have urgency or diarrhoea, or if it is not a suitable time to open your bowels. We can improve the strength of this muscle and how well it works by exercising it.



Why are my sphincter muscles weak?

Either one of your sphincter muscles, or in some instances both, can become weak. The main causes of weak sphincter muscles are childbirth, particularly births involving instruments or a tear, constipation, straining to open your bowels or general wear and tear as we become older. Being overweight can put extra strain on your muscles as well.

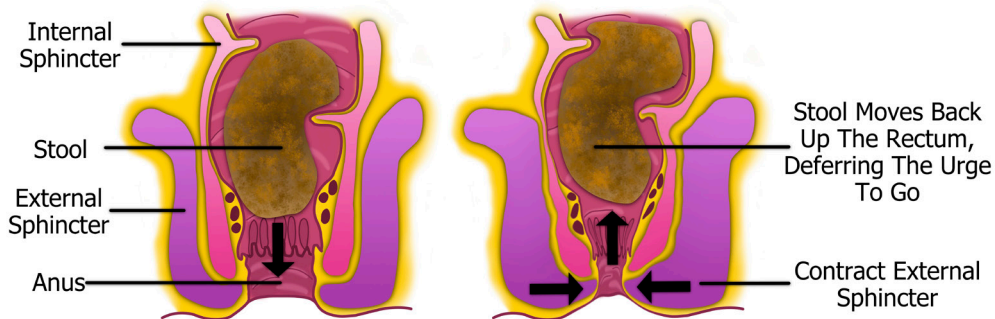
Why do I experience urgency?

Some people suffer with faecal urgency and/or urge incontinence. This means you have a sudden strong desire to open your bowels, and may or may not leak stool before you can get to the toilet.

Some people will get an urgent sensation to go to the toilet because their gastrointestinal system works quicker than normal to process food, or their colon moves stool through the system very quickly. This means your rectum, which is your 'storage tank' for stool, fills rapidly, giving you the sudden sensation to pass stool. If you have a condition such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), you may be more prone to severe urgency.

If you have a weak external sphincter muscle, your ability to 'put off' the urge to open your bowels is reduced, so this may be the cause of your urgency. If the muscle is particularly weak, you may then experience leakage of stool. This is known as urge incontinence.

Strengthening your muscles will help to improve your control, to prevent leakage from happening and to be able to defer urgency. It is also important to try not to get into a cycle of ensuring a toilet is close by at all times, or panicking when you get any sensation in the rectum, as these restrictions and fears can make the problem worse.



How do my muscles work?

When you open your bowels, your sphincter muscles will relax and open to allow the stool to pass out. Once you have finished, a small amount of stool may be left in the anal canal. Normally, your sphincter muscles will close firmly once you have finished opening your bowels. This keeps the back passage shut. Any little amount of stool will then be squeezed out, allowing you to wipe clean.

If your sphincter muscles are weak, they do not close tightly or quickly enough and you may find you have difficulty wiping clean. You might leak stool once you have finished, and this may be a small amount or a large amount. This may only happen for a few minutes after you have opened your bowels, or you might have leakage for several hours.

You may experience leakage during exercise, lifting, or walking. You may also pass a small amount of stool with wind.

How can I strengthen my muscles?

The internal sphincter cannot be strengthened by exercises, even if it is the cause of your symptoms. We can, however, strengthen the external sphincter with exercises. By regularly exercising the external sphincter, it will become thicker and stronger, which will allow it to help to close off the internal sphincter. This will then prevent leakage. Normally, it will take a minimum of three months to strengthen your sphincter muscle, so it will require some hard work and determination.

How do I do my exercises?

It is important to do your exercises correctly, otherwise you will not strengthen them properly. You may find it easier to try your exercises in sitting so you can feel the muscle movement, but you can do them in all positions.

Focus on your back passage. Imagine you are trying to stop yourself passing wind or stool. You should feel your back passage tighten and close. Feel the muscle pull up away from the chair (if sitting down). Try not to squeeze your buttocks or thighs together, and try to keep your tummy as relaxed as possible. Remember to breathe.

It is important to perform three different types of squeezes with your muscles - long, sub-maximal and short.

Long squeezes: try to squeeze and hold your sphincter muscles as strong as you can and for as many seconds as you can. You are aiming to hold for up to 10 seconds. Let the muscle relax for four to five seconds, then repeat this hold as many times as you can in a row. You are aiming for 10 holds in a row.

Sub-maximal squeezes: these will help you when you need to get to the toilet urgently. Tighten your muscle as strong as you can, then let it go slightly, imagining you are working it at 50% of its maximum squeeze. Hold this squeeze for as many seconds as you can - try to aim for 15-30 seconds. Let the muscle relax for at least 10 seconds, then see if you can repeat this squeeze two to three times in a row.

Short squeezes: tighten your muscles as quickly and as strong as you can, then let them release. Repeat this short squeeze as many times as you can, aiming for 10 repetitions in a row.

Your ultimate goal is: 10 long squeezes of 10 seconds, two to three sub-maximal squeezes of 15-30 seconds, and 10 short squeezes.

These exercises need to be performed regularly; we recommend at least three sets per day. Try to do your exercises in standing, sitting and laying down.

Helpful reminders

Sometimes it is difficult to remember to do your exercises. Here are some tips which you may find useful on how to remember to do them.

- Place coloured sticky dots or Post-it notes on items you look at or use on a day-to-day basis, e.g. telephone, computer screen, mirror, diary. Every time you see a dot or sticker, do some squeezes
- Every time you use the toilet, do a set of exercises once you have finished opening your bowels or passing urine
- If you have access to a smart phone or tablet, there are several free apps available to download, which remind you when to do your exercises

Personal exercise programme

Long squeezes:

Practise holding for _____ seconds.

Then relax for a count of _____ seconds.

Repeat _____ times in a row.

Short squeezes:

Practise _____ short squeezes.

Remember to relax fully between each squeeze.

Sub maximal squeezes:

Hold a sub-maximal squeeze for _____ seconds.

Repeat _____ times in a row.

Repeat your personal exercise programme at least three times a day.

Progressing your personal exercise programme

As your muscles get stronger or start to release better, it is important to gradually build up your exercises. Your physiotherapist will advise you whether you need to do this by holding each squeeze for more seconds, by doing more squeezes in a row, or by relaxing for a shorter period between each squeeze.

It can take several months for you to notice a difference in how well your muscles work, so please do not give up if you do not notice much change in the first few weeks.

If your physiotherapist needs to make changes to your personal exercise programme, they will write these in the next section titled additional information. Please remember to bring this leaflet with you to each appointment.

Additional information

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Your Physiotherapist is

Contact telephone number: 01493 452378

Feedback

We want your visit to be as comfortable as possible. Please talk to the person in charge if you have any concerns. If the ward/department staff are unable to resolve your concern, please ask for our Patient Advice and Liaison (PALS) information. Please be assured that raising a concern will not impact on your care. **Before you leave the hospital you will be asked to complete a Friends and Family Test feedback card.** Providing your feedback is vital in helping to transform NHS services and to support patient choice.

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our patients... each other... ourselves

BEHAVIOURS:

Courtesy and respect

Attentively kind and helpful

Responsive communication

Effective and professional

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The hospital can arrange for an interpreter or person to sign to assist you in communicating effectively with staff during your stay. Please let us know.

For a large print version of this leaflet, contact PALS 01493 453240

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© May 2019
Revised December 2022
James Paget University Hospitals NHS
Foundation Trust
Review Date: December 2025
PH 43 version 2