

Anal sphincter exercises



Information for patients

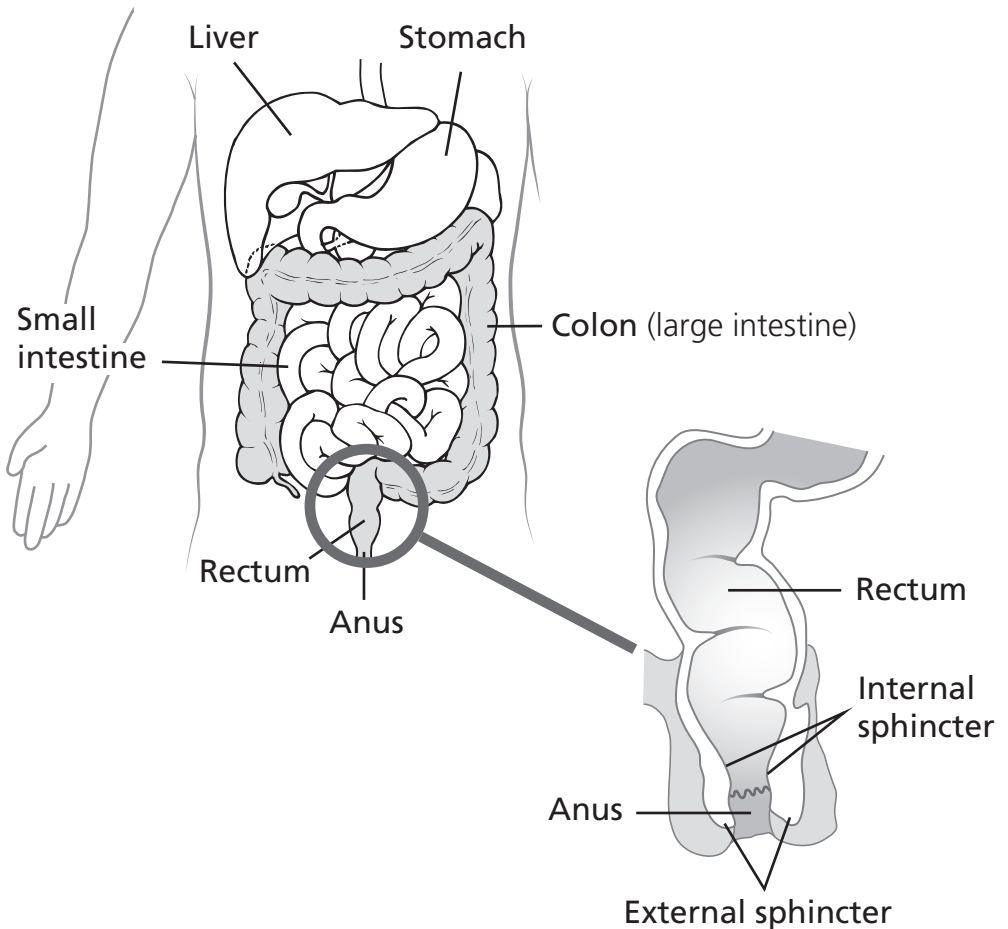
Sheffield Teaching Hospitals



Anal sphincter exercises to help lessen leakage from the bowel

Sphincter exercises, when practiced correctly, can build up and strengthen the muscles that help to hold in gas and stools in the back passage.

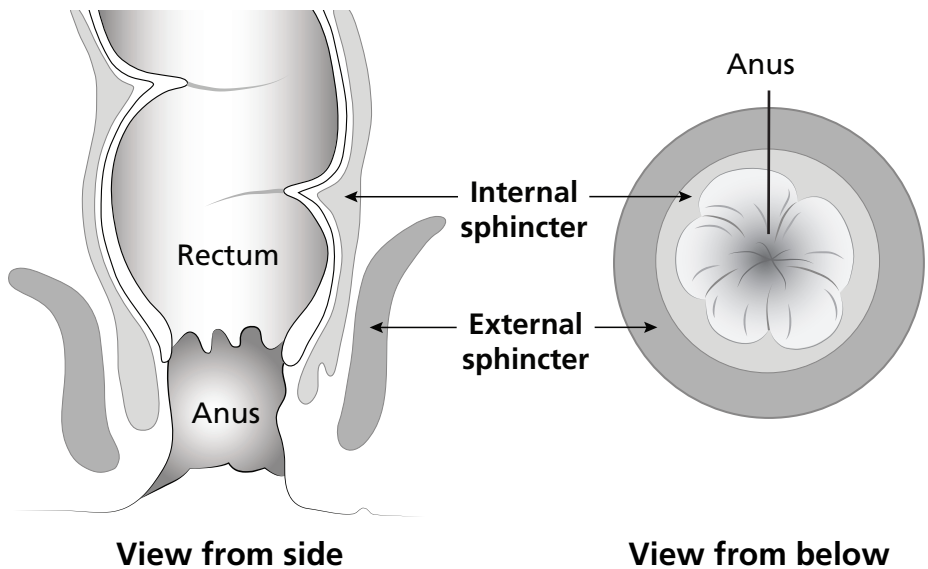
Our anatomy



The anus or back passage has two rings of muscle around it. The inner ring is the **internal sphincter**; this is usually closed at all times except when you are trying to have your bowels opened. This is normally automatic; you don't have to think about it.

The outer ring of muscle is the **external sphincter** which is a voluntary muscle which you can tighten up more firmly if you have urgency or diarrhoea.

Both these muscles wrap around the anus. We get the sensation of needing to pass a stool when the stool enters the rectum. The internal sphincter relaxes and allows the stool to enter the top part of the anus. Sensitive nerves in the anal canal can tell you whether it is gas or a stool waiting to come out. By squeezing the external sphincter you may be able to stop the stool from coming straight out. The squeeze action could move the stool back into the rectum where it stays until you reach the toilet.



Why do the muscles become weak?

Sometimes one or both of these sphincter muscles can become weak; this may be because of childbirth, constipation and straining or general wear and tear. Sometimes there are no obvious reasons why. If the muscles are weak and you cannot squeeze to hold on, you will feel urgency and you may leak gas, liquid or solid stools.

After a bowel action, the sphincter would normally shut and close your back passage; this squeezes out any last residual stool. You can then wipe clean and there is no further leakage. If the muscles are weak or damaged, they may not close straight away or shut completely after you have been to the toilet. You may find it difficult to wipe yourself clean and you may continue to leak for a while after opening your bowels. The amount of leakage can vary and may last for several hours. You may also leak a small amount of stool during any physical exercise, walking or when passing wind.

How can exercises help?

It is the external sphincter muscle that we can exercise. Exercising this muscle can strengthen it and make it thicker, which gives more support and may compress the internal muscle to prevent faecal leakage. As with all other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise the sphincter muscles the stronger they should become. These exercises will also help other muscles in your pelvic floor.

It is hard work and can take several months to be effective.

How to do the exercises

Sit comfortably in a good posture with your knees slightly apart. Squeeze the muscles around the back passage as if you are trying to stop the passage of wind. Now practice squeezing as tightly as you can as if you are about to leak. Try not to hold your breath! You should be able to feel the muscles pulling up and away from the chair but don't

just squeeze your buttocks and make sure you are not bobbing up and down on your chair. You are now exercising your anal sphincter and nobody should know you are doing them.

Practising your exercises

1. **Hard squeezes:** Sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart. Tighten and pull up your sphincter muscles as tightly as you can. Hold on for five seconds then relax for five seconds. Repeat this five times. This will work on the **strength** of your muscles.
2. **Long squeezes:** Next stage, pull your muscles up to half of their maximum squeeze. Count how long you can do this for. Then relax for 10 seconds. Repeat this twice. This will work on the **staying power** of your muscles.
3. **Quick squeezes:** Pull up the muscles as quickly and as tightly as you can, relax and repeat. See how many you can do before you get tired.
4. Every day aim to do five hard squeezes, two long squeezes and five quick squeezes, at least five times a day.
5. You will notice over time that you will be able to hold on for longer as your muscles become stronger.
6. As with any exercise it takes time for muscles to get stronger. It may take you several months before you gain your full strength.

Remember, you can do these exercises wherever you are, nobody need know what you are doing!

Tips that may help you

Some people find that sitting on the toilet and raising their feet on a footstool 30-40cm high in front of the toilet helps to empty their bowel more completely. An upturned washing up bowl can be used.

Take your time whilst on the toilet. Performing the exercises will help to 'milk out' any residue in your back passage.

Sometimes reducing some of your intake of fibre cereals, caffeine and artificial sweeteners can help. This will change stool consistency, making it easier to get to the toilet and may also help to ease bloating and wind.

It may help to use a suppository to clear the residue after a bowel action.

Skin care is important; a barrier cream may help, please ask your clinician.

Watch your weight; extra weight puts extra strain on your muscles.

Get into the habit of practicing your exercises with things you may do on a regular basis, for example when having a drink.

To check if you are exercising the right muscle you can put a finger on the anus as you squeeze. You should be able to feel a gentle lift and squeeze if you are exercising the right muscle. Or get a mirror and have a look, you should be able to see a slight pucker up of your anus as you squeeze.

Once you have regained control of your bowels, remember to continue to practice your exercises a few times each day to ensure the problem does not come back.

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