

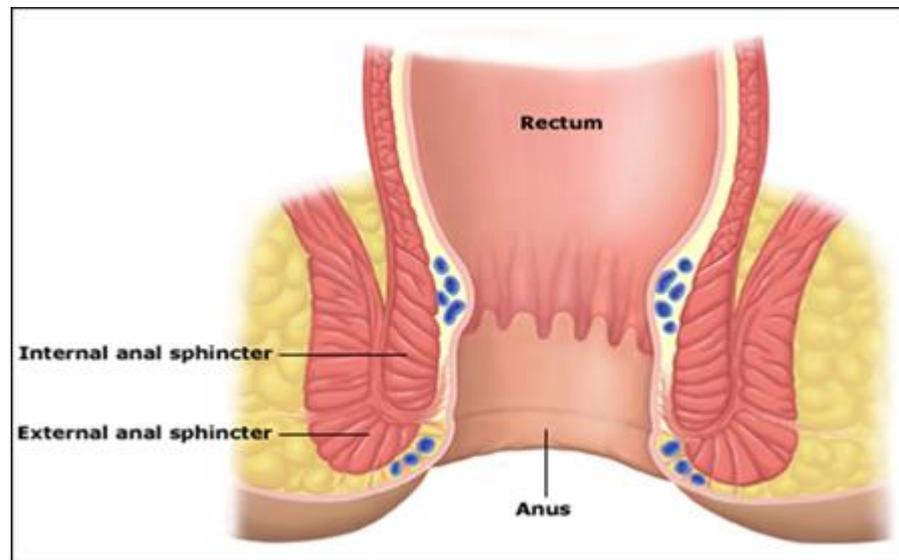
## Patient information

# Exercises to strengthen external anal sphincter

## Introduction

The back passage (anus) has two rings of muscle around it.

The inner ring is the internal anal sphincter. This is an involuntary muscle over which we have no conscious control. It should be closed at all times except when we are trying to open our bowels. This should be automatic so that we don't need to think about it.



The outer ring of muscle is the external anal sphincter. This is a voluntary muscle which we can tighten especially if we have urgency or diarrhoea.

Either of these muscles can become weak. This could be due to childbirth, constipation and straining, general wear and tear, heavy lifting and surgery, but there may be no obvious cause. If you have weak muscles you may leak gas, liquid or solid stools.

External anal sphincter exercises can help to reduce leakage from the bowel. By exercising, the muscle should become thicker and stronger and give more support to the internal sphincter thus helping to prevent leakage. Like any other muscle in the body, the more you exercise and use it, the stronger and more effective it will become.

## **How to do the exercises**

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Now try to squeeze the muscle as if you are trying to stop yourself passing wind. You should feel your muscles around your anus start to tighten and move away from the chair. Your buttocks, tummy and legs should not move and you should not be holding your breath. You are now exercising your sphincter muscle.

Imagine your sphincter muscle is a lift. If you squeeze it as tightly as you can, the lift goes up to the 4th floor. You won't be able to hold it there for long and it probably won't get you to the toilet in time. However, now try tightening more gently and only take the lift up to the 2nd floor. You should be able to hold this contraction for much longer.

## **Practising your exercises**

Sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart.

Tighten and pull up the sphincter muscle as hard as you can. Hold for a slow count of .....

Then relax for about 5 secs. You are aiming to hold for at least a slow count of 5.

Repeat 5 times. This will help strengthen your muscles.

Next pull up your muscles to about half of their maximum (as if going up to the 2nd floor). See how long you can hold this for.

Relax for at least 10 secs.

Repeat this twice. This will improve the endurance of the muscles.

Finally, pull up the muscles as fast and tightly as you can. Relax and then pull up again.

See how many times you can achieve this before you get tired. You are aiming to do 10 eventually.

Try and do these exercises 4 to 6 times a day.

As the muscles get stronger you will be able to hold for longer and to do more repetitions without the muscle getting tired. These muscles can take a few months before you notice much change so don't get despondent.

If you are doing the exercises well, nobody will know what you are doing so once you are confident doing them you can do them anywhere.

## **Testing yourself**

If you are not sure you are doing the exercises properly, put a finger on the anus as you squeeze. You should feel a gentle lift and squeeze. Or look at the area in a mirror and you should see the anus pucker as you squeeze.

## **Other tips that may help**

The better you empty your bowels the less there will be to leak. Take your time when opening your bowels. Don't rush. When you think you have finished do some exercises before you wipe.

Raising your feet 20-30cms on a stool, pile of books etc helps some people empty more completely.

Try reducing your intake of high fibre cereals, caffeine and artificial sweeteners, as they can all make your stools looser.

## **Contact number**

If you have any problems you can contact the Physiotherapy Department on 01284 713300.

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*<http://www.disabledgo.com/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust/main>*