



York and Scarborough  
Teaching Hospitals  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Exercise and Advice for people with bowel problems

Information for patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

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# What causes faecal incontinence or bowel leakage?

- **Soft or loose stools** can make it difficult to reach the toilet on time and increases the occurrence of staining/ soiling after opening bowels.
- Excessively strong contractions of the bowel wall causing a feeling of **urgency** to reach the toilet due to the fast movement of stool into the rectum.
- **Weakness** of the muscles surrounding the anus (anal sphincter muscles) with reduced ability to hold back the stool and reach the toilet in time.

By improving any one of these factors, better bowel control may be achieved with reduction in soiling.

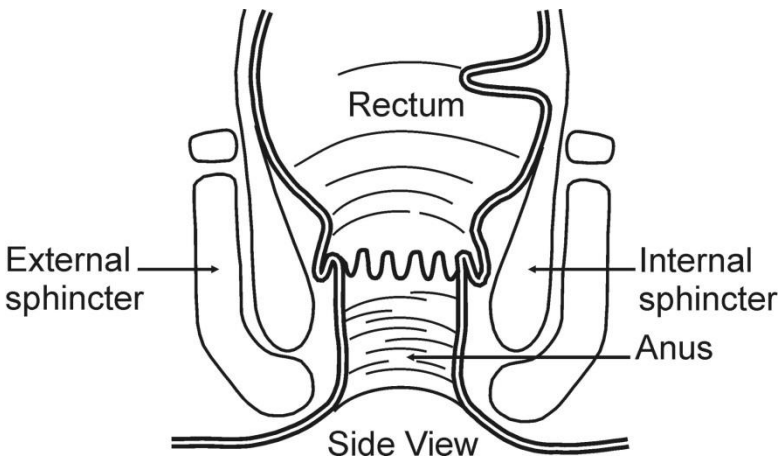
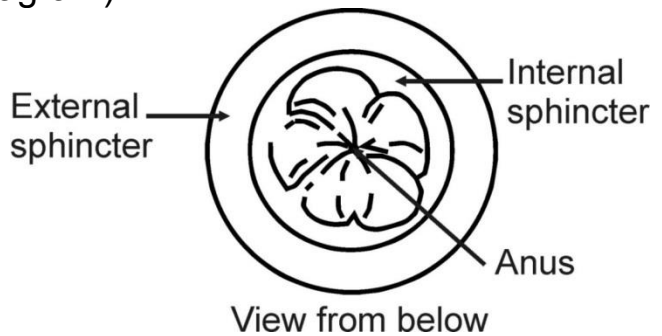
Your physiotherapy treatment should help you become more aware of the action of the anal sphincter muscles (part of the pelvic floor muscles), improve the strength where they are weak, improve their function and give you an overall understanding of how to try to achieve a more normal bowel habit.

# Anal Sphincter/Pelvic floor muscle exercises

Exercises to strengthen the sphincter muscles when done correctly may help to hold back stool and wind in the back passage (anal canal).

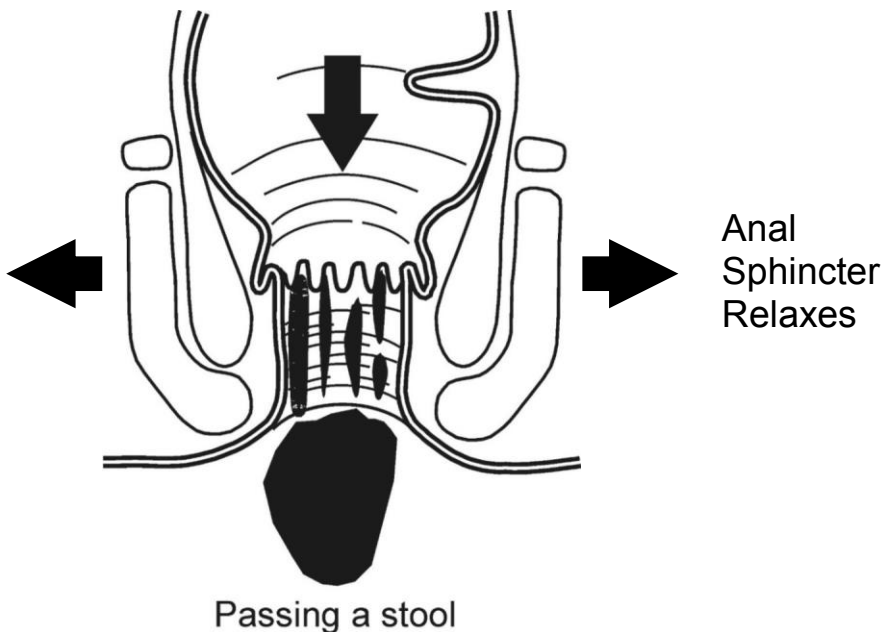
## Where are these muscles?

The back passage or anus has two rings of muscles around it. (See diagram)

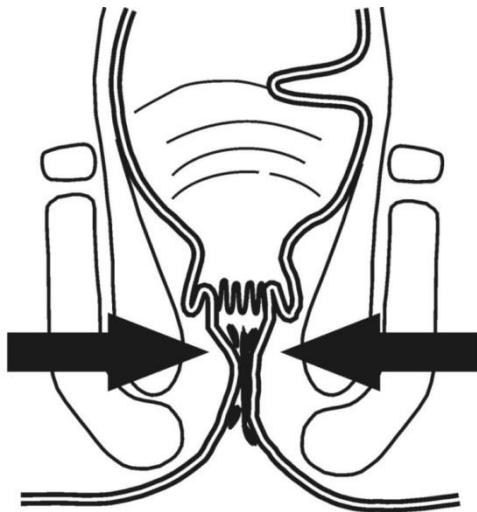


The inner ring, the internal sphincter, is an involuntary muscle that you have no control over. The outer ring of muscle, the external anal sphincter (EAS), is a voluntary muscle that you can tighten up to close at will when you have urgency or diarrhoea. Both muscles wrap right around the anus and either or both of these sphincter muscles can become weak. This may be because of childbirth, constipation and straining or general wear and tear.

When you pass a stool, there is usually some residue left behind in the anal canal (see diagram). Normally the sphincter muscles 'snap shut' after you have finished opening your bowels to close the back passage. This squeezes out any residue. You can wipe clean and there is no further leakage.



If the muscles are injured or weak they may not close immediately or completely after you have been to the toilet. This often makes it difficult to wipe clean and you may find that you leak for a while after opening your bowels. You may also find that you leak during strenuous exercise, lifting heavy objects or when you walk any distance. Some people find that a small amount of stool is passed with wind.



Weak  
Sphincter  
Muscle

Muscle does not close completely  
thus trapping the stool in the anus

## How can exercises help?

The internal sphincter, which is often the problem underlying leakage, cannot be strengthened by exercises. **It is the external sphincter muscle that you can exercise and strengthen.** The aim is to exercise this muscle enough to make it bulkier and stronger so that it gives more support and may compress the internal muscle to prevent leakage. Speeding up the reaction of this muscle may also help with the control of wind. Like any other muscle in the body, the more you use them, the stronger the sphincter muscle will be.

### Learning to do the exercises:

It is important to learn to do the exercises in the right-way and takes approximately four months to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles.

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Now imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from the back passage. To do this, 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 pass wind. You should be able to feel the muscle move.

This 'squeeze and pull up' is your sphincter muscle working.

## **Practising your exercises**

To **strengthen** the muscle, practise the following:

Sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart.

### **Exercise 1 – Slow squeeze**

- ‘Squeeze and ‘pull up’ from the back passage and hold.
- Hold tightened for..... seconds, then relax for .....seconds to allow the muscle to recover.
- Repeat at least .....times.

As the muscles becomes stronger you will find that you can hold for longer and do more repetitions.

### **Exercise 2 – Fast squeeze**

- ‘Squeeze and pull up’ from the back passage quickly and then relax and repeat.
- Try for .....quick pull ups.

**This will also help with the control of wind.**

## Exercise 3

To work on the **endurance** or staying power of the muscle:

- ‘Squeeze and pull up’ gently, pulling up the muscles to half of their maximum squeeze.
- See how long you can hold this for; you should be able to hold this for longer than your maximum squeeze. Aim to hold for least 20 seconds.

**This will help to calm urgency and give you more time to get to the toilet safely.**

Carry out all of these exercises **three** times every day

Try not to hold your breath when doing the exercises.

- To help you remember to practise the exercises every day you can link them with things you do regularly such as watching a TV programme or cleaning your teeth etc.
- Check you are exercising the right muscle by placing a finger on the anus. You should feel a gentle lift as you squeeze.
- Use the muscles when you need them: ‘squeeze and pull up’ if you feel urgency, if you are about to leak or pass wind or prior to lifting.

There are no known risks to Anal Sphincter exercise.



# Tips for healthy bowels

- A good, balanced fibre rich diet should help to give you a firmer, even stool consistency. Keep a food diary. This may highlight the effect of certain foods and drink on your digestion causing changes to stool formation.
- Fluid intake: 1.5 to 2 litres per day.
- Ensure correct sitting position on the toilet (see diagram). The better you empty your bowel the less there will be to leak.

Knees higher than hips

Lean forwards with elbows on knees

Widen your waist as you bulge your tummy forwards

Focus on breathing out, avoid holding your breath.



- Practise the 'snap shut': 'Squeeze and pull up' as strongly as you can before you wipe.

## Things to Remember

- Exercises are for life. Once you have regained control of your bowel, don't forget to continue exercising to ensure the problem does not come back.
- Be mindful of your weight - extra weight puts extra strain on your muscles
- Try to include 30 minutes of general exercise regularly i.e. walking, swimming.

Further information and advice:

**[www.thepogp.co.uk](http://www.thepogp.co.uk)**

This leaflet has been produced using information from a leaflet from St. Mark's Hospital, & Burdett Institute. With thanks to St. Mark's Hospital for their kind permission for us to use their information.

## **Tell us what you think of this leaflet**

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:  
Women's Health Physiotherapy Department,  
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PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email [pals@york.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@york.nhs.uk).

An answer phone is available out of hours.

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