

Learning to control your bowels

This leaflet provides information about how to regain control of your bowels. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your care.

Why do I have difficulty in controlling my bowels?

There are many reasons for people developing problems controlling their bowels. These can include childbirth, pelvic floor dysfunction and anal surgery as well as the ageing process. Several factors are involved in regaining control of your bowels. These include nutritional, behavioural and physical components.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Problems controlling your bowel might include the need to rush to empty your bowel (urgency), bowel incontinence (also known as faecal or anal incontinence or a bowel “accident”) as well as difficulty controlling flatus (wind).

Dietary Advice

If you are having difficulty controlling your bowels, it is important to optimise your stool type. A bulky and firm stool will be easier to defer compared to small hard pellet stools or mushy stools.

- Avoid constipation and straining to empty your bowels. In the long term constipation can make the problem worse.
- Aim to eat between five and seven portions of vegetables and fruit each day. These will help ensure your stool remains soft and the skins of fruit and vegetables can also provide fibre to bulk to your stool.
- Ensure your diet also includes some wholegrain or wholemeal carbohydrates (for example brown rice, brown pasta, granary or

wholemeal bread etc.). The “husks” cannot be absorbed and therefore add bulk to your stool.

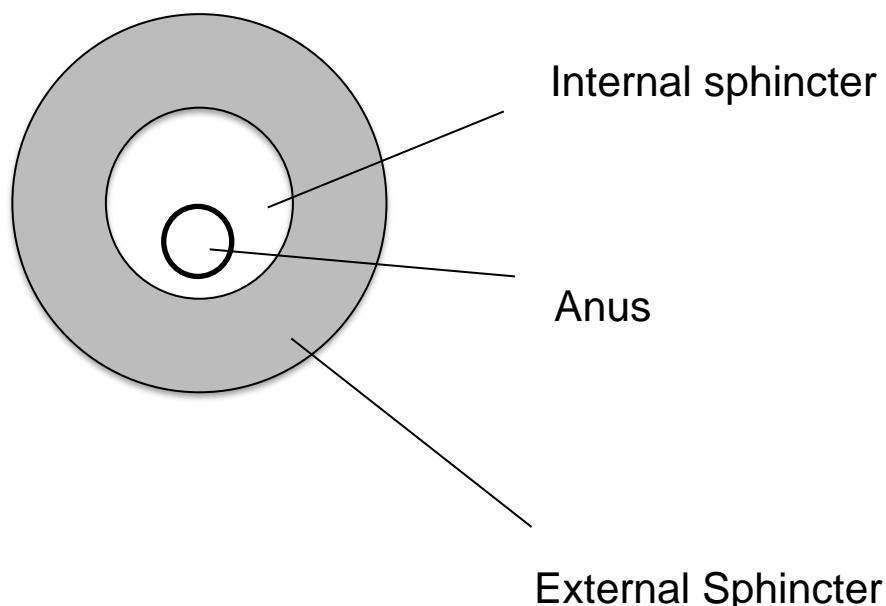
- Aim to drink 1.5 litres of fluid each day. This will ensure you are well hydrated and therefore keep your stool soft and help with bowel movement.

If you have a digestive problem, please seek advice from a dietician or your GP as this information may not be applicable to you.

Sphincter Exercises

These sphincter exercises can help you to improve your bowel control. When done correctly, these exercises can build up and strengthen the muscles to help you to hold both gas and stool in the back passage.

Where are these muscles? The back passage or anus has two rings of muscle around it (see diagram).

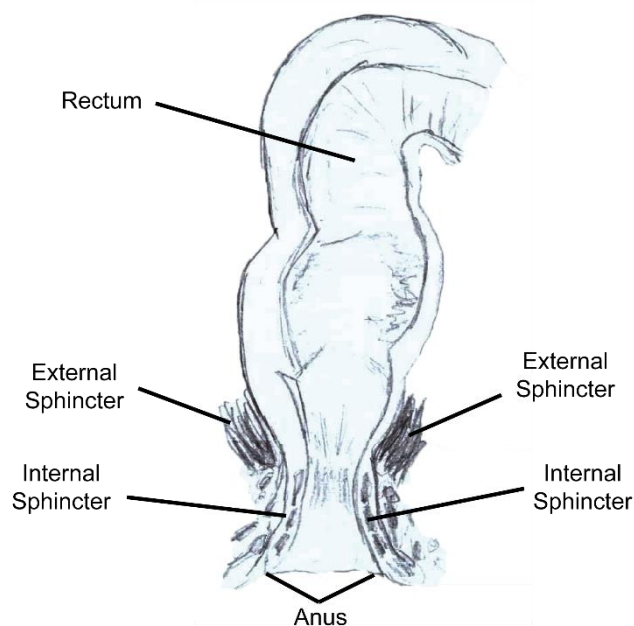


The inner ring is the **internal sphincter**. You have no control over this muscle, which should be closed at all times except when you are actually trying to open your bowels.

This is normally automatic; you don't have to think about it.
You cannot exercise or strengthen this muscle.

The outer ring of muscles is the **external sphincter** which is a voluntary muscle which you can tighten up to close it more firmly if you have urgency or diarrhoea. This muscle can be exercised and strengthened.

Side view of the muscles:



Both muscles wrap right around the anus. When a stool comes into the rectum the internal sphincter relaxes and allows the stool to enter the top part of the anus. Very sensitive nerves in the anal canal can tell you if it is gas or stool waiting to come out. If it is stool, you squeeze your external sphincter to stop it from coming straight out. This squeezing moves the stool back into the rectum, where it waits until you get to the toilet.

Either or both of these sphincter muscles can become weak. This may be because of childbirth, constipation and straining, following operations involving the anus and rectum or general weakness with ageing. Sometimes there is no obvious reason why.

If you have weak muscles and cannot squeeze enough to hang on, you will feel urgency and may leak gas, liquid or even solid stool.

Sphincter muscle exercises can strengthen these muscles so that they once again give support. This will improve your bowel control and improve or stop leakage of gas or stool. Like any other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger they will become.

First locate the muscles:

In sitting with your knees slightly apart, pretend you are trying to hold in a bowel movement or prevent yourself from passing wind.

You should now feel the muscles around your anus start to tighten.

Second tighten the muscles:

Now try to squeeze and lift these muscles as hard as you can. It is important to continue to breathe normally when contracting your muscles and **NOT** hold your breath. You should **NOT squeeze** your buttocks, tummy or legs when you do this exercise. Be aware of the skin around the back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from the chair.

You are now exercising your anal sphincter. If you are unsure that you are exercising the right muscle, put a finger on the anus as you squeeze to check. You should feel a gentle lift and squeeze if you are exercising the right muscle. Alternatively, look at the area in the mirror; you should see the anus pucker up as you squeeze it.

There are three different exercises you should do:

1) Slow contractions

Squeeze and tighten your sphincter muscles.

Hold as long as you can (eventually for 10 seconds)

Slowly release and relax for another 10 seconds

Repeat as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10).

2) **Fast contractions**

Squeeze and lift your sphincter muscles as quickly and as tightly as you can

Slowly release. Repeat as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 20).

3) **Sub-maximal contractions**

Squeeze and lift your sphincter muscles up to about half of their maximum squeeze.

Try to hold this for as long as you are able (up to 20 or 30 seconds)

Repeat two or three times

Aim to increase the time you can hold. You can also try these in standing or walking.

Repeat these exercises **three times a day**.

Try to make a habit of doing these exercises with things you do regularly (for example every time you sit down for a meal).

Try to actively tighten these muscles if you have a feeling of urgency or are worried that you are about to leak before you reach the toilet. It is better to use a gentle squeeze that you can hold for longer when doing this.

It takes time for exercises to make muscles stronger. You may need to exercise regularly for several months before control of your bowel starts to improve. Don't forget to continue these exercises even once you have regained control of your bowels. This will ensure that the problem doesn't come back.

Holding on Programme

Acknowledgement: Copied with kind permission from St. Mark's Hospital, Harrow, London.

As with many bodily functions, you can “retrain” your bowel. The following programme can teach you to “hold on” when you need to empty your bowel. Your rectum (where you store stool), your sphincter muscles (around your back passage) and your confidence need retraining to help you overcome this problem. This can take time, so be patient.

Next time you need to open your bowels:

1. Sit on the toilet and hold on for one minute before opening your bowels. Don't forget to take a watch / clock in with you. Gradually increase this to five minutes. Do not worry if you are unable to do this initially but keep practising.
2. When you have mastered this, repeat the above but hold on for 10 minutes before opening your bowels. It may be helpful to take something to read with you. This stage is harder but remember you are on the toilet and therefore “safe”.
3. When you can delay opening your bowels for 10 minutes whilst off the toilet, you should now gradually move further away. Maybe sitting on the bed in your bedroom.

As your muscles are now becoming stronger you should be able to hold on for 10 minutes and as you feel more confident, increase the distance between you and the toilet.

Gradually you will find that you can increase the distance and the time away from the toilet. This may take some time to master but the more practice you have at both your sphincter exercises and this programme the sooner you will improve.

Other tips

- Starting your day by eating a good size breakfast can stimulate your gut. Most people will find that the strongest urge to open their bowels is 20-30 minutes after breakfast. It can be helpful to spend some time sitting on the toilet at this time to see if nature takes its course and if you are able to empty your bowels before your day starts. It is important that you relax and don't rush. Do not be tempted to try to push or strain if the urge to empty does not come.
- Watch your weight as extra weight puts strain on the muscles that help provide control at the back passage.
- You may find that avoiding drinks with caffeine in them (for example coffee, tea, chocolate, energy drinks and Coke etc.) may help. Caffeine can speed up the transit time through the bowel and makes bowel urgency worse.

Finally, retraining and muscle strengthening can take time. Do not give up as, if you persist, you will find that your symptoms improve. Seek further help or advice by consulting a Pelvic Health physiotherapist if you are not already seeing one.

Useful sources of information

Continence Foundation / The Bladder and Bowel Foundation (B&BF)

<https://www.bladderandbowel.org>

St George's Pelvic Health Physiotherapy resource page



Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns please contact the Pelvic Health Physiotherapy Team on

pelvic-health-physiotherapy@stgeorges.nhs.uk

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit
www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or care. You can contact the PALS team on the advisory telephone line Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 2pm to 5pm.

A Walk-in service is available:

Monday, Tuesday and Thursday between 10am and 4pm

Friday between 10am and 2pm.

The Walk-in and Advisory telephone services are closed on Wednesdays.

Please contact PALS in advance to check if there are any changes to opening times.

PALS is based within the hospital in the ground floor main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings.

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS UK

The NHS provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health. **Web:** www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones. **Tel:** 111

AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website (www.accessable.co.uk). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



Reference: PHP_LCYB_LP_03 **Published:** April 2025 **Review date:** April 2027