



# Sphincter exercises for people with bowel control problems

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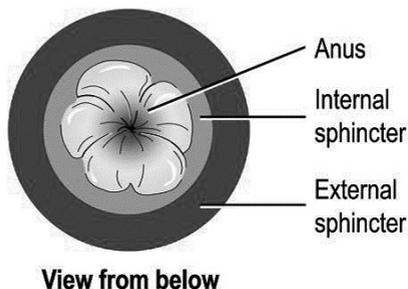
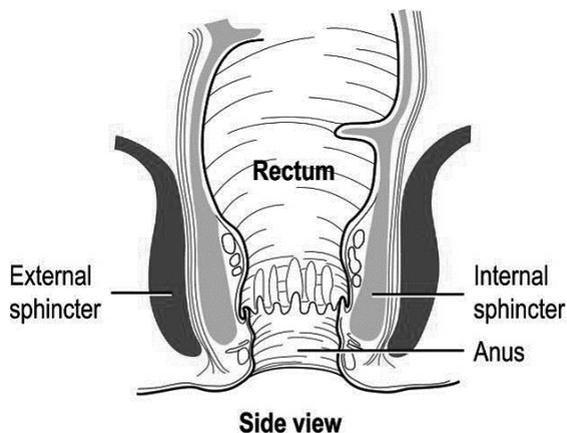
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Sphincter exercises can help you to improve your bowel control. When done correctly, these exercises can build up and strengthen the muscles to help you to hold both gas and stool in the back passage.

## Where are these muscles?

The back passage, or anus, has two rings of muscle around it



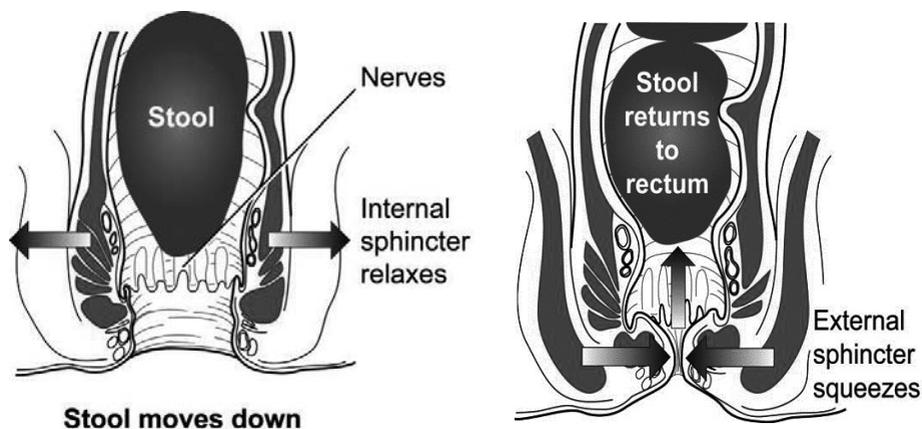
The inner ring is the internal sphincter, an involuntary muscle, which you have no control over. This is part of the bowel wall and should be closed at all times, except when you are actually trying to open your bowels. This is normally automatic; you don't have to think about doing it.

The outer ring of muscle 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.

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. A message is sent to the brain that the rectum is full and you are able to make a conscious decision about whether to go to the toilet and empty the back passage or not.

If it is socially inconvenient to go to the toilet then you can consciously contract the external sphincter and push the motion back into rectum. There is an additional muscle, which is part of the external sphincter, called the puborectalis muscle. This slings around the back of the rectum and is attached at the front to the bone at the front of your pelvis. When you contract the external sphincter, this muscle also contracts and causes the angle which is present in the rectum to sharpen, therefore decreasing the chance of incontinence.



Any of these muscles can become weak, which means the anal canal does not close fully and so leakages may occur. If the internal sphincter muscle is not working then you may leak without warning. If the external sphincter is weak you may not be able to hang on to get to the toilet and may leak gas, liquid or solid stool.

Damage to the muscle can occur during childbirth, particularly if there has been a traumatic delivery or the use of forceps. Constipation and straining may also cause weakness. These muscles also get weaker with age due to general wear and tear and changes in hormone levels. Bowel surgery can also affect how this works by shortening the bowel or removing some of the rectum. Sometimes there is no obvious cause.

## How can exercises help?

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 the sphincter muscles will be.

## What are the risks?

Sphincter exercises are very safe; they will not make the problem worse. There are no recorded side effects to this treatment. However for some patients they do not improve leakage problems.

## What are the benefits?

Practising these exercises on a regular basis can improve control over bowel function and so reduce episodes of leakage and soiling. Research studies have shown that nearly three quarters of patients find improvement to their symptoms, and more than a third are cured. NICE recommends these exercises as a treatment option before more invasive interventions.

## What are the alternatives?

The alternatives to this treatment are altering the consistency of the stool by use of medication, and this may be helpful in conjunction with the exercises.

Other treatments are more invasive and include use of anal plugs or irrigation techniques.

## Learning to do the exercises

It is important to learn to do the exercises in the right way, and to check from time to time that you are still doing them correctly.

1. Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart.
2. Now imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from the bowel. To do this you must squeeze the muscle around the back passage.
3. Try squeezing and lifting that muscle as tightly as you can, as if you are really worried that you are about to leak. You should be able to feel the muscle move. Your buttocks, tummy and legs should not move at all.
4. You should be aware of the skin around the back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from your chair. Really try to feel this. You are now exercising your anal sphincter. You should not need to hold your breath when you tighten the muscles!
5. Now imagine that the sphincter muscle is a lift. When you squeeze as tightly as you can your lift goes up to the fourth floor. But you cannot hold it there for very long, and it will not get you safely to the toilet as it will get tired very quickly. So now squeeze more gently, take your lift only up to the second floor. Feel how much longer you can hold it than at the maximum squeeze.

## Practising your exercises

1. Sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart. Slowly tighten and pull up the sphincter muscles as tightly as you can. Hold tightened for at least five seconds, and then relax for about four seconds.

Repeat five times. This will work on the strength of your muscles.

2. Next, pull the muscles up to about half of their maximum squeeze. See how long you can hold this for. Then relax for at

least 10 seconds.

Repeat twice. This will work on the endurance or staying power of your muscles.

3. Pull up the muscles as quickly and tightly as you can and then relax and then pull up again, and see how many times you can do this before you get tired. Try for about five quick pull-ups. This will work on the response of your muscles.
4. Do five of these exercises as hard as you can, two as long as you can and five quick pull-ups. Four to six times every day.
5. As the muscles get stronger, you will find that you can hold for longer than five seconds, and that you can do more pull-ups each time without the muscle getting tired.
6. It is helpful to do these exercises both sitting and standing as working against gravity will help strengthen the muscles.
7. It takes time for exercise to make muscle stronger. You may need to exercise regularly for several months before the muscles gain their full strength.

The pelvic floor muscles tire easily and you may notice that it takes a lot of concentration to begin with to do these exercises correctly.

If you find that the muscles 'let go' too quickly and that you cannot hold for a count of five, just hold them for as long as you can. Use this as your baseline.

For example, if you can only hold the contraction for a count of three, then every time you do your exercises, contract the muscles for a count of three.

Gradually try to work up to four, then five.

It is important to try not to:

- squeeze your buttocks together
- bring your knees together
- hold your breath
- lift your shoulders/eyebrows or toes

## Tips to help you

At first it is probably a good idea to set aside some time for these exercises and really concentrate on getting them right. But quite soon they should become easy to do wherever you are. Nobody need know what you are doing!

Get into the habit of doing your exercises with things you do regularly – every time you touch water if you are a housewife, every time you answer the phone if you are at the office – whatever you do often.

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. Or look at the area in a mirror – you should see the anus pucker up as you squeeze it.

Use your muscles when you need them - pull up the muscles if you feel urgency and that you are about to leak. But remember that you cannot hold your tightest squeeze for very long, so you are better to use a gentler squeeze that you can hold for longer. Your control will gradually improve.

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

Once you have regained control of your bowel, don't forget your exercises. Continue to do them a few times each day to ensure that the problem does not come back.

Squeezing the pelvic floor muscles can help you right away to avoid leakage. Practice coordinating contraction of these muscles with an event in which you may be prone to leak urine (i.e. coughing, sneezing, nose-blowing, lifting a heavy object, etc). You should also contract the muscles when you need to delay going to the toilet.

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

If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to ask.

## Contact details

### Colorectal clinical nurse specialists

Telephone: 0121 371 4980

Telephone: 0121 371 4501 (answerphone)

## Useful contacts

### Bladder and Bowel Community

Helpline: 0845 345 0165

[www.bladderandbowel.org](http://www.bladderandbowel.org)

## Core

Telephone: 0207 486 0341

[www.corecharity.org.uk](http://www.corecharity.org.uk)



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