

### Equality Statement

At South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust we are fully committed to quality and diversity, both as an employer and as a service provider. We have a policy statement in our Equality Strategy that clearly outlines our commitment to equality for service users, patients and staff:

- You and your family have the right to be treated fairly and be routinely involved in decisions about your treatment and care. You can expect to be treated with dignity and respect. You will not be discriminated against on any grounds including age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation
- You have a responsibility to treat other service users, patients and or staff with dignity and respect

Our information for patients can also be made available in other languages, Braille, audio tape, disc or in large print.

### PALS

We offer a Patient Advice Liaison Service (PALS). This is a confidential service for families to help with any questions or concerns about local health services.

You can contact the service by the direct telephone line on 01926 600054, by email: [Pals@swft.nhs.uk](mailto:Pals@swft.nhs.uk) or by calling in person to the PALS office which is located in the Lakin Road entrance to the hospital.

**Catalogue Number:** SWH 00186

**Version:** 2.0

**Publication Date:** March 2017

**Review Date:** March 2022

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If you require any further information please contact: Lead Physiotherapist in Pelvic Health Team 01926 608068

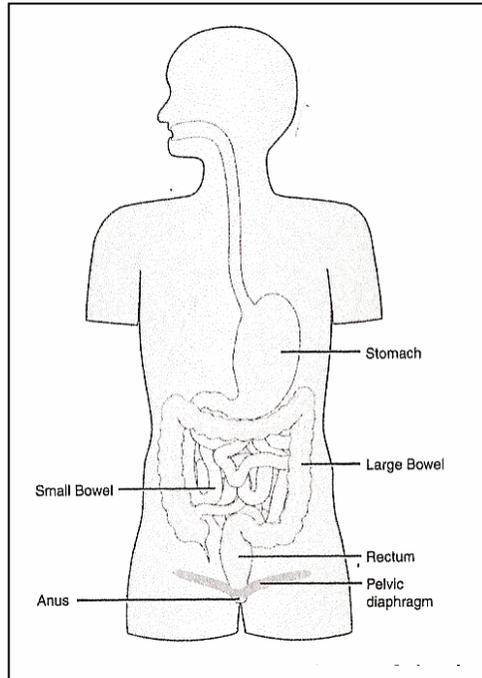
## Physiotherapy

# Bowel Control

## Patient Information Leaflet

In order to understand what may go wrong with bowel control it is important to understand how the bowel works.

## How the Healthy Bowel Works



Digestion of food starts in the mouth and finishes at the anus.

Goodness and nutrients from food are absorbed as it passes through the gut and the waste is expelled at the anus. Most of the nutrients (goodness) are absorbed in the small bowel, and the waste passes into the large bowel. Water is absorbed as the waste products move around the large bowel and they are formed into stools or faeces.

5. It takes several months of exercising to gain good muscle control, but you will see a gradual improvement as you go along. As you get stronger you may find you can hold a contraction for longer than 5 seconds and that you can do more quick pull-ups before the muscles get tired.

6. The exercises are not hard to do, each session will not take you very long, but the exercises are sometimes hard to remember. You could try to find something in your life that you do regularly which may trigger your memory to exercise. For example every time you put the kettle on, or while washing your hands after the toilet, or whatever you do on a regular basis.

7. Even when you have regained your bowel control you must keep exercising – **‘use it, or lose it!’**

If you continue to experience problems you may need to seek further medical advice

## Practising your exercises

1. You can do your exercises in sitting, standing or lying with your knees slightly apart. At the beginning it may be easiest to exercise lying down but you should gradually try to work your muscles in standing because this is the position where you are likely to experience the most difficulty in controlling your bowel.

Squeeze and lift the muscles around the back passage and hold them as tightly as you can. Try to hold while you count to 5, then rest while you count to 5. Repeat this exercise at least 5 times. This exercise will work on the strength of your muscles.

2. Now tighten your muscles again, but only to about half their maximum squeeze. See how long you can hold this for; it should be much longer than the last exercise. Repeat at least 5 times. This exercise will help the endurance of your muscles and will help you to hold on for longer when you feel the need to open your bowels.

3. Squeeze and tighten the muscles as quickly as you can, let go and tighten again. These quick muscle contractions will help to speed up the reaction of the muscles and will help you when you need to control wind.

4. You should try to repeat these exercises – 5 as hard as you can, 5 as long as you can and as many quick pull-ups as you can – at least 3 times a day.

Stool consistency varies considerably, from small hard lumps to mushy depending on the amount of water absorbed. Ideally stools should be soft, smooth and sausage shaped, and easy to pass.

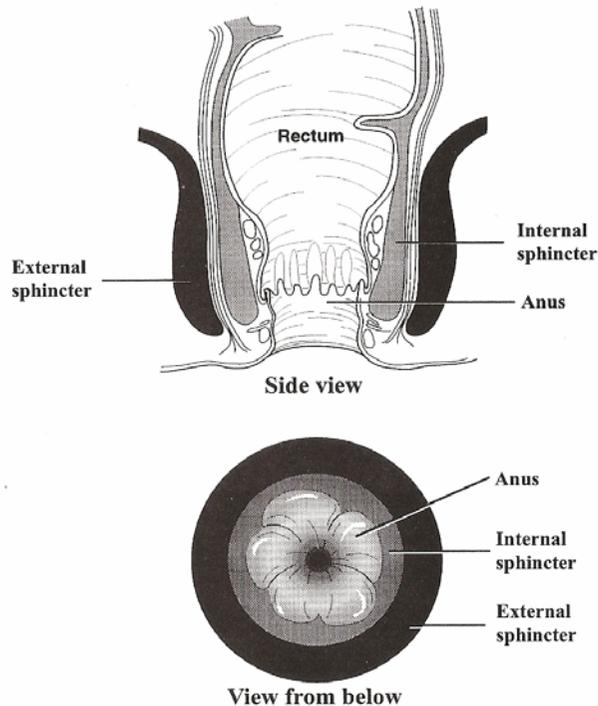
Stool usually passes into the rectum when there are mass waves of contractions in the gut; this is like toothpaste being squeezed along a tube.

These movements of the large bowel are often triggered by the gastro-colic reflex. This means that when you eat something it triggers a response in your gut, which causes these waves of contraction to occur. Stool arrives in the rectum and you feel the need to open your bowels.

For most people the gut is quiet at night and the first meal of the day and the physical activity of getting up stimulates the gut and causes an urge to open the bowels shortly after breakfast.

Food takes an average of 1 to 3 days to move through the gut but this is very variable. Equally, how often you open your bowels is variable; 'normal' can mean anything from 3 times a day to 3 times a week.

## Controlling your bowel



Around the anus there are an inner and outer ring of muscle, the internal sphincter and the external sphincter.

The inner ring, the internal sphincter, is an involuntary muscle. This means that it is automatic, and it should be closed at all times except when you want to open your bowels.

The outer ring, the external sphincter, is a voluntary muscle. This means you can tighten it when you want to, for instance if you are trying to control wind.

## Exercises to help bowel control

Exercising your muscles will help to improve your bowel control. As you have already heard the internal sphincter muscle is an involuntary muscle, this means that you cannot work it by willpower. The external sphincter on the other hand is a voluntary muscle and you can exercise it to make it thicker and stronger. This should help to close the anus and prevent leakage.

When you are exercising your external anal sphincter you will probably also be working your deep pelvic floor muscles. These muscles are important to help you control your bladder as well as your bowel. The more you exercise your muscles the stronger and more efficient they will become. However it will take several months and perseverance to be really effective.

## How do I exercise my muscles?

Sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Imagine you are trying to stop passing wind and squeeze the muscle around the back passage. It is a feeling of 'squeeze and lift' and you will feel the skin around the back passage tightening. You should be able to do this exercise without tightening your buttock muscles and without holding your breath. Try to concentrate hard on the exercise, and you will get a much more efficient muscle contraction.

If you are unsure if you are exercising the right muscle you could put a finger on the outside of the anus and you should be able to feel a lift and squeeze.

## Your Diet

1. Base your meals on starchy foods
2. Eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day.
3. Eat more fish - including a portion of oily fish each week
4. Cut down on saturated fat and sugar
5. Try to eat less salt - no more than 6g a day for adults
6. Drink plenty of water

If you have difficulty controlling your bowels, look at the amount of fibre in your diet as you may be having too much or too little.

Do you mainly eat refined cereals like white rice/pasta/bread? If yes, choose wholemeal varieties instead and eat your 5 portions of vegetables.

Do you mainly eat high fibre foods? (e.g., lentils, beans, high fibre cereals, fruits and vegetables) If yes, reducing it can help your symptoms.

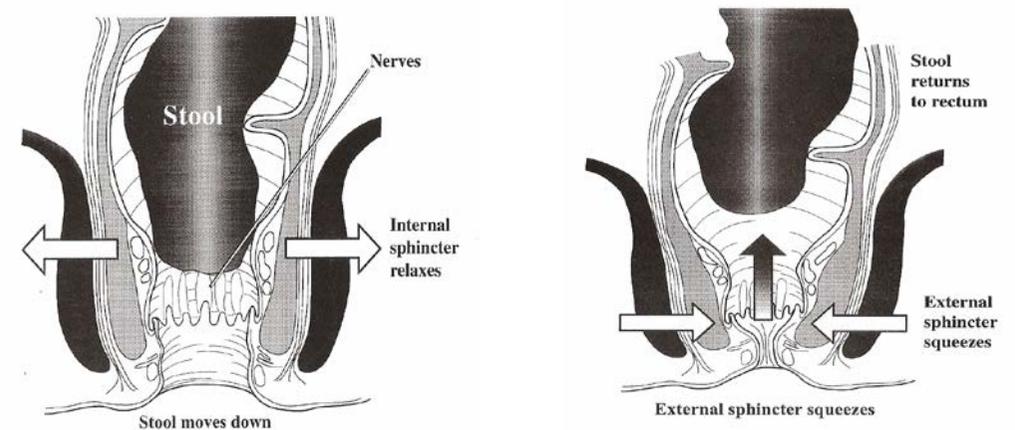
If you are making changes to your fibre intake, do it gradually over the course of a week and not overnight.

When stool enters the rectum the inner ring, or internal anal sphincter, relaxes and allows the stool to pass into the upper part of the anal canal where there are very sensitive nerve endings.

These sensitive nerve endings tell us whether it is wind, which can be safely passed if convenient, diarrhoea which may mean we have to rush to the toilet, or a normal stool.

If a normal stool is sensed and it is not convenient to find a toilet we can squeeze the outer ring of muscle, the external anal sphincter, which pushes stool back up the anal canal into the rectum. The rectum then relaxes and the urge to empty the bowel wears off until the next mass waves of contraction of the gut.

Normally this whole process happens quite unconsciously.



These muscles that control the bowel can become damaged or weak. This may be because of childbirth, constipation and straining, some surgery or general wear and tear. Sometimes there is no obvious cause.

The loss of control of these muscles may lead to leakage from the bowel called faecal incontinence. Damage to the outer ring, the external sphincter, may lead to a feeling of urgency. This means having to rush to the toilet as soon as the need is felt. If the toilet is not reached in time stool may leak on the way.

Damage to the inner ring, the internal sphincter, often leads to passive soiling. This means that soft stool or small pellets may leak out without the person realising it is happening. This may happen after the bowels have been open or happen with physical activity.

Bowel leakage may also happen with diseases where the bowel becomes inflamed and some neurological diseases.

## Healthy Bowel Habits

You can help to keep your bowel regular by following these points

- Eating regularly will help your bowel get into a pattern. The bowel is most active about 30 minutes after a meal and this is particularly so in the mornings so don't miss breakfast.
- Allow yourself time and privacy to empty your bowel, but do not sit for too long. The bowel should empty with minimal effort, so don't strain
- When you feel the need to empty your bowel try to respond. If you ignore the call because you are too busy or there are too many people around you may become constipated. The longer stool waits around in your large bowel the harder it becomes and the more difficult it is to pass
- Exercise is good for your bowels. If the 'outside' works the 'inside' will too!
- Being overweight puts an extra strain on the muscles and may make the problem worse.
- Eating a good diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables may help regulate your bowel. However if you have difficulty controlling your bowels too much fibre may make things worse. The following advice may help you.