



Bowel Incontinence

What is incontinence?

Incontinence is the impaired ability to control gas or stool. Its severity ranges from mild difficulty with gas control to severe loss of control over liquid and formed stools. Incontinence to stool is a common problem, but often it is not discussed due to embarrassment.

What causes incontinence?

There are many causes of incontinence. Injury during childbirth is one of the most common causes. These injuries may cause a tear in the anal muscles. The nerves supplying the anal muscles may also be injured. While some injuries may be recognized immediately following childbirth, many others may go unnoticed and not become a problem until later in life. In these situations, a prior childbirth may not be recognized as the cause of incontinence.

Anal operations or traumatic injury to the tissue surrounding the anal region similarly can damage the anal muscles and hinder bowel control. Some individuals experience loss of strength in the anal muscles as they age. As a result, a minor control problem in a younger person may become more significant later in life.

Diarrhea may be associated with a feeling of urgency or stool leakage due to the frequent liquid stools passing through the anal opening. If bleeding accompanies lack of bowel control, consult your physician. These symptoms may indicate inflammation within the colon (colitis), a rectal tumor, or rectal prolapse - all conditions that require prompt evaluation by a physician.

How is the cause of incontinence determined?

An initial discussion of the problem with your physician will help establish the degree of control difficulty and its impact on your lifestyle. Many clues to the origin of incontinence may be found in patient histories. For example, a woman's history of past childbirths is very important. Multiple pregnancies, large weight babies, forceps deliveries, or episiotomies may contribute to muscle or nerve injury at the time of childbirth. In some cases, medical illnesses and medications play a role in problems with control.

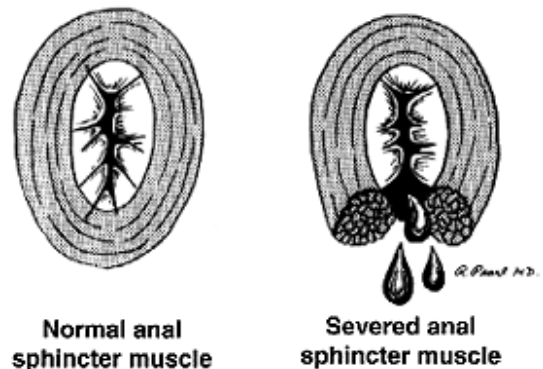
A physical exam of the anal region should be performed. It may readily identify an obvious injury to the anal muscles. In addition, an ultrasound probe can be used within the anal area to provide a picture of the muscles and show areas in which the anal muscles have been injured.

Frequently, additional studies are required to define the anal area more completely. In a test called anal manometry, a small catheter is placed into the anus to record pressure as patients relax and tighten the anal muscles. This test can demonstrate how weak or strong the muscle really is. A separate test may also be conducted to determine if the nerves that go to the anal muscles are functioning properly.

What can be done to correct the problem?

Treatment of incontinence may include:

- Dietary changes
- Constipating medications
- Muscle strengthening exercises
- Biofeedback
- Surgical muscle repair
- Artificial anal sphincter



After a careful history, physical examination and testing to determine the cause and severity of the problem, treatment can be addressed. Mild problems may be treated very simply with dietary changes and the use of some constipating medications. Diseases which cause inflammation in the rectum, such as colitis, may contribute to anal control problems. Treating these diseases also may eliminate or improve symptoms of incontinence. Sometimes a change in prescribed medications may help. Your physician also may recommend simple home exercises that may strengthen the anal muscles to help in mild cases. A type of physical therapy called biofeedback can be used to help patients sense when stool is ready to be evacuated and help strengthen the muscles.

Injuries to the anal muscles may be repaired with surgery. Some individuals may benefit from a technique that delivers electrical energy to the skin and muscles surrounding the anus which results in firming and thickening of this area to help with continence.

In certain individuals that have nerve damage or anal muscles that are damaged beyond repair, an artificial sphincter may be implanted. The artificial sphincter is a plastic, fluid filled doughnut that is surgically implanted around the damaged anal sphincter. This artificial sphincter keeps the anal canal closed. When an individual wants to have a bowel movement, the fluid can be pumped out of the doughnut to allow the anal canal to open.

In extreme cases, patients may find that a colostomy is the best option for improving their quality of life.

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