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External anal sphincter exercises

Issued by the Physiotherapy Department



Introduction

You have been referred to the physiotherapy department for some advice on how to strengthen your sphincter muscle. This leaflet explains how to exercise your external anal sphincter muscle which will help to strengthen it.

The benefits

If you do your exercises daily you should see an improvement in 12 to 20 weeks but you must continue some exercises for the rest of your life.

The risks

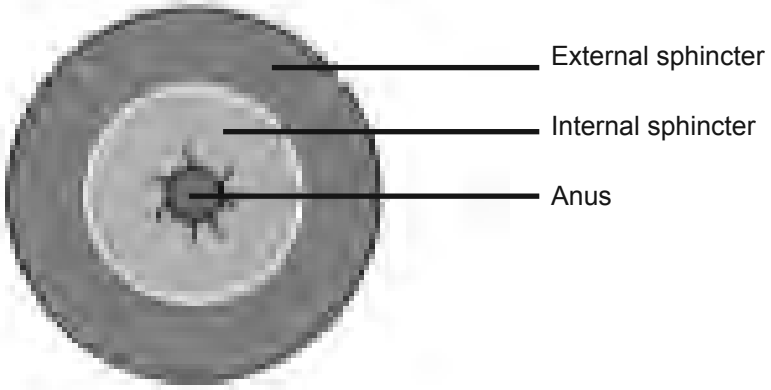
If you do not exercise these muscles they may become weaker. This will increase the risk of developing urgency to open your bowel and faecal incontinence.

What are the anal sphincter muscles?

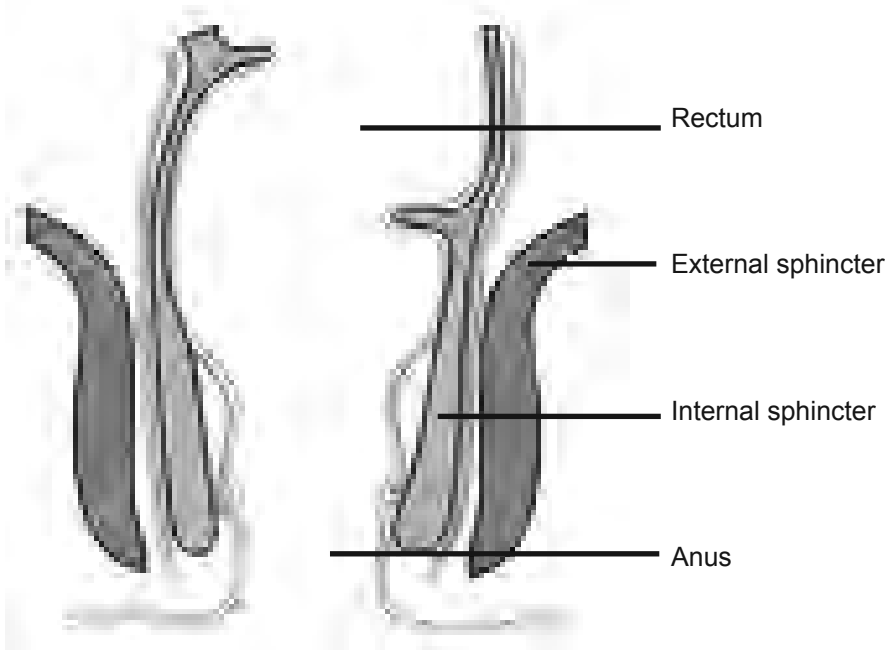
The back passage or anus has two rings of muscle around it:

- The inner ring is the internal sphincter. You have no control over this muscle. It should be working at all times except when you are trying to open your bowels. You cannot exercise or strengthen this muscle.
- The outer ring of muscle is the external sphincter. This is voluntary muscle which you can actively tighten if you have urgency or diarrhoea. This muscle can be exercised and strengthened.

Diagram of anal sphincters



View across - 'rings of muscle'



Side view

Diagrams produced with permission of the Bladder and Bowel Foundation

What do the sphincter muscles do?

The sphincter muscles wrap 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 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 can get to the toilet.

People with a weak external sphincter muscle typically experience urgency and if they can't reach a toilet in time they become incontinent.

The weak muscle cannot squeeze hard enough to stop the stool from coming straight out.

What can cause a weak sphincter muscle?

Some of the common causes of weakness are:

- Childbirth and pregnancy
- General pelvic floor muscle weakness.
- Persistent heavy lifting
- Following operations involving the anus and rectum.
- Rectal prolapse.
- Growing older.

How do I strengthen my external anal sphincter muscle?

Sphincter exercises could help improve the strength of the sphincter muscle and improve bowel control.

External anal sphincter exercises.

To locate your sphincter muscles 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.

Step 1: Sit, stand or lie on your back with your knees bent and legs comfortably apart.

Step 2: Concentrate on where your sphincter muscles are positioned around your anus and imagine trying to stop yourself from passing wind. 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.

Slow contractions

- Squeeze and tighten your sphincter muscle.
- Hold as long as you can (eventually to a count of 10).
- Slowly release and relax for a few seconds.
- Repeat as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10).

Fast contractions

- Squeeze and lift your sphincter muscles hard and fast.
- Slowly release.
- Repeat as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10).

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 can (up to 20 or 30 seconds).
- Repeat two or three times.

Repeat this session of exercises several times a day.

Your eventual aim is to be able to do:

- 10 long steady holds to the count of 10
- 10 short hard fast contractions
- Two or three sub maximal contractions
- Repeat the above three times per day.

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.

How can I check that I am doing a correct sphincter muscle contraction?

- In sitting you should be aware of the skin around the back passage tightening and being pulled up away from the chair.
- Your buttocks, tummy or legs should not move at all.

Are there alternative treatments?

There are no alternative treatments. The only way to strengthen muscle is by exercise.

Other advice

- Encourage your bowel to open at a certain time of day that suits you.
- Try to have a balanced diet to include at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.
- Avoid constipation
- Do not strain to empty your bowels.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine. Caffeine may speed up the transit time through the bowel so limit coffee and coke/cola and reduce amounts of tea if your bowels are opening too often.
- Seek further help or advice by consulting a Women's Health Physiotherapist.

Contact numbers

Telephone 0344 811 811 and ask for the extension number for the physiotherapy department at your local hospital:

North Tyneside General Hospital	ext 2723
Wansbeck General Hospital	ext 36010
Hexham General Hospital	ext 5030
Alnwick Infirmary	ext 6750
Berwick Infirmary	ext 6643

Sources of information

Sources, other than the trust where information can be obtained:

National organisations that may be of help:

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

www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

Bladder and Bowel UK helpline 0161 6078219

www.bladderandboweluk.co.uk

Bladder & Bowel Community

www.bladderandbowel.org

Alternative Formats

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on **03 44 811 8118**

Other sources of information

NHS 111

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx

NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

www.nice.org.uk

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 01670 511098

Email: northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk

Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

www.northumbria.nhs.uk

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