

Bowel Function

Normal bowel function

It is normal to open your bowels from between three times a day, to three times a week. Normal can differ for each individual.

Normal bowel function should mean we:

- Have awareness of the need to open our bowels.
- Are able to hold on to go to the toilet (or control wind if wanted) until an appropriate place and time.
- Can open our bowel completely, without straining when we sit on the toilet.

Consistency of the stool can also vary and this depends on many factors, but ideally it should be a soft, smooth sausage shape, which is easy to pass.

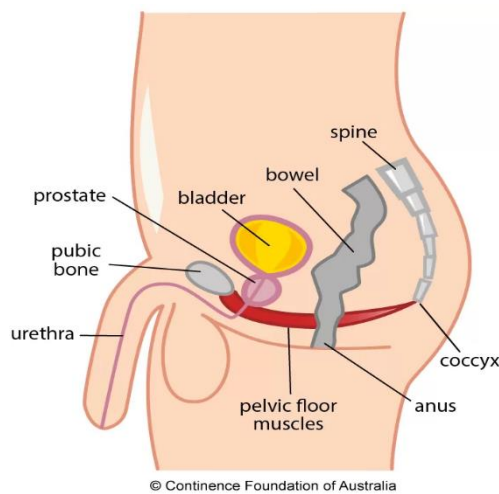
Common disorders of the bowel

- **Constipation**- the bowel movement is infrequent, hard, and difficult to pass.
- **Obstructed defaecation**- is the inability to evacuate contents from the rectum even with excessive straining.
- **Faecal incontinence** is the leakage of gas, solid or liquid material from the back passage due to the reduced ability to control bowel closure.
 - **Faecal urge incontinence** happens when you are not able to get to a toilet quickly enough when you get the feeling of needing to go.
 - **Passive faecal incontinence** is when you are unaware of the leakage from your back passage of wind or stool.
 - **Stress faecal incontinence** is when you leak stool from the bowel when the abdominal pressure increases on activity e.g. cough, sneeze, exercise, lifting etc.



Exercises for people with leakage from the bowel

The pelvic floor is a sheet of muscles and connective tissue (fascia) that forms the floor of the pelvis. They attach at the front of the pelvis to the pubic bone, and span backwards to attach at the base of the spine around the sacrum and coccyx (tailbone). Sphincters/ valves at the base of the bladder and underneath the prostate gland help to prevent urine leakage. The anal sphincter at the base of the back passage maintains bowel control. The pelvic floor muscles wrap around these valves to assist them in staying closed.



The back passage (or anus) has two rings of muscles that wrap around it. These are:

The internal sphincter – which is the inner ring. This is an involuntary muscle, which should be closed at all times except when you are actually trying to open your bowels. This usually happens automatically, it is not something you need to think about doing if it is working well.

The external sphincter – which is the outer ring. This muscle is a voluntary muscle which means you can tighten, and therefore close it more firmly if you have urgency or diarrhoea. Either or both of these sphincter muscles can become weak. There may be no obvious reason, but it is often due to constipation/straining or general wear and tear. If you have weak muscles you may leak gas, liquid or solid stools. When you pass a stool there is usually some residue of the stool left behind in the anal canal. After opening your bowels, the back passage normally 'snaps shut' via the sphincter muscles and in doing so squeezes out any residue. You can then wipe clean and there is no further leakage.

If the muscles are damaged or weak they may not close immediately or completely after you have been to the toilet. You may then find it difficult to wipe clean and you may find that you leak for a while after opening your bowels. The amount and time this may happen can vary. You may also find that you leak with exertion or when you pass wind.

We cannot strengthen the internal anal sphincter as this is an involuntary muscle but we can strengthen the external anal sphincter with specific exercises. This may give more support and may also compress the internal sphincter thus helping to prevent leakage and allowing for better control of wind.

Exercise 1 Superficial muscle fibres

Lie or sit comfortably with your knees slightly apart. Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from the bowel. To do this you must squeeze and lift the muscle around the back passage entrance as tightly as you can.

There are two types of exercises you should do:

1. Quick and strong

Squeeze as hard as you can and then relax. Rest a second and then repeat up to 10 times.

2. Endurance

Squeeze and hold for up to 10 seconds. You must feel the muscle relax after each contraction. Aim to repeat it as many times as you can, building up to a maximum of 10 times.

Exercise 2 Deep muscle fibres

Squeeze deep inside the back passage, imagine you are trying to stop /delay an urgent bowel movement or passage of wind

There are two types of exercises you should do:

1. Quick and strong

Squeeze as hard as you can and then relax. Rest a second and then repeat up to 10 times.

2. Endurance

Squeeze and hold for up to 10 seconds. You must feel the muscle relax after each contraction. Aim to repeat it as many times as you can, building up to a maximum of 10 times.

- DO NOT** Pull in your stomach excessively
- DO NOT** Squeeze your legs together
- DO NOT** Tighten your buttocks
- DO NOT** Hold your breath.

You must aim to do these exercises at **least 3 times a day**. Generally, it takes 3-6 months to get a muscle really strong again. Do not do so many that the muscle begins to ache, remember it is quality not quantity!

Defaecation Techniques

The way you empty your bowels is important for those who have difficulty emptying and for those with leakage, as this will encourage better bowel function long term. It is important to avoid constipation.

- Drink 1.5-2 litres of fluid a day
- Eat a healthy diet
- Ideally do not ignore a call to open your bowels and try to work with the urge
- Do not strain. Give yourself enough time to empty completely
- Sit fully on the toilet: do not hover
- Sit on the toilet seat with knees bent, feet apart and supported on a foot stool so your knees are higher than hips
- Arms resting comfortably on your legs
- Keep your tummy relaxed
- Do not hold your breath
- Relax your pelvic floor, make the anus wide
- A slight bearing down will help the stool to move out of the back passage – watch this video for more detail <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODkg3cvZAuk>
- After voiding faeces, tighten your anal sphincter with 5 – 10 quick squeezes before wiping your bottom





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