



**University Hospitals
Bristol and Weston**
NHS Foundation Trust

Patient information service
Physiotherapy

Anal sphincter exercises for people with bowel control problems



Where are the anal sphincter muscles?

Your anus (bottom) has two rings of muscles (see below).

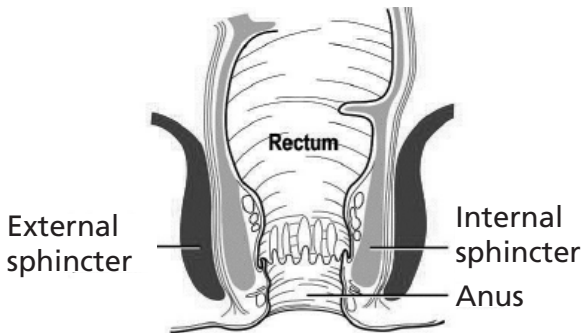
Internal anal sphincter muscles

The inner ring of muscle. It works all the time to keep poo in and relaxes when you open your bowels. It is an involuntary muscle. You cannot control it and it cannot be exercised.

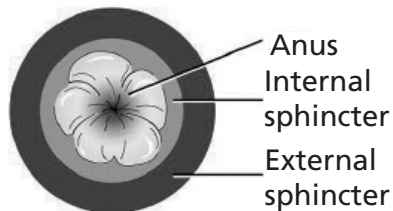
External anal sphincter muscle

The outer ring of muscle. This is the voluntary muscle which you squeeze to control yourself when you have bowel urgency (rushing to the toilet) or when you do not want to let out wind/fart.

This muscle can be exercised and strengthened. With exercise, it should become thicker and stronger and give more support to your inner sphincter to help prevent leaking.



Side view



View from below

How your lower bowel works

- When a poo comes into the rectum the internal sphincter relaxes and the poo moves into the top part of the anus.
- Sensitive nerves know whether it is poo or wind.
- If it is poo and you are not near a toilet then you squeeze the external sphincter, and the poo moves back into the rectum to wait until you are sitting on a toilet. This usually happens naturally. You do not need to think about it unless you are concerned that you have left it too late and you may have an accident.
- If it is wind/fart then you can decide whether you want to let it out or not.
- After you have done a poo then your anal sphincter should close completely, and you can wipe clean.

What may happen if the sphincter muscle is damaged or weak?

- You may often need to rush urgently to the toilet as you are worried you may have an accident.
- You may leak liquid, solid poo on the way to the toilet.
- You may leak wind and/or poo when you do physical exercise, walk distances or lift something heavy.
- If your sphincter muscle does not close completely after doing a poo you may find you are unable to wipe clean and may also leak a small amount of poo for a while afterwards.

- You are unable to control your wind/fart in social situations.
- When you let out wind you may leak poo as well.

How to strengthen your external anal sphincter muscle

- Lie down with your knees bent, feet flat and apart.
- Concentrate on where your anal sphincter muscles are positioned around the anus.
- Try and squeeze the muscles around your anus as if you are stopping yourself from passing wind. Try to squeeze and lift these muscles as hard as you can. It is important to breathe normally and not to hold on to the breath. Also, make sure you are not tightening your buttock or tummy muscles. Or squeezing your legs together
- If you are not sure you are doing this correctly you could put a finger onto your anus. You should feel a gentle lift and squeeze.
- Or you could look at the area with a mirror. You should see your anus pucker as you squeeze.

There are three types of exercises for this muscle

1. Slow exercises

Squeeze and tighten your anal sphincter muscles as tight as you can. Hold for as long as you can (up to 10 seconds). Then slowly release the muscle and rest for few seconds. Repeat as many as you can (up to 10 times).

2. Fast exercises

Squeeze and lift your sphincter muscles hard and as fast as you can. Slowly release. Repeat as much as you can (up to 10 times).

3. Sub-maximal contractions

Try and squeeze your anal sphincter muscle 50% of a maximum contraction or halfway.

First, try to hold this up to 10 seconds and repeat 3 times.

When you can do this easily then increase by 10 seconds.

Progress by adding extra 10 seconds on until you can hold for one minute.

How often to do the sphincter exercises

- Try and do the above three types of exercises 3 to 5 times a day.
- Your eventual aim is to be doing 10 long steady holds up to 10 seconds, 10 short and fast contractions and three sub-maximal contractions.
- You should tighten the sphincter muscles when you have the feeling of urgency or if you are worried if there is going to be a leakage before getting to the toilet, or accidental release of wind/fart.

- It takes 6 to 12 weeks to build up the strength in muscles. Therefore, it is recommended to continue your anal sphincter strengthening exercise for three months.
- Once you have regained control of your bowels then do not forget about these exercises. Continue to do them once a day or a few times a week to ensure that the problem does not come back.

Tips to help you

- Remembering to do your exercises is a challenge. Linking them to something you do on a regular basis can often help you remember. For example, when you boil a kettle, after you have been to the toilet, or when having a shower.
- If you have an urgent need to rush to the toilet try this: Stand still. Tighten your anal sphincter and all your pelvic floor muscles for as long as you can (up to 30 seconds). This should reduce the urgency. Then walk slowly to the toilet.
- You could also practice 'holding on' when you reach the bathroom to help improve your bowel control. Try and delay sitting on the toilet for a few minutes by squeezing your muscles hard. You could also try sitting on something hard, like the side of the bath. As your control improves lengthen the time that you wait.
- Tighten your muscles whenever you cough, sneeze or lift can also help you avoid leakage of poo or accidental wind/fart.
- Watch your weight. Extra weight puts extra strain on your muscles.

- See if reducing high fibre cereals, caffeine, and artificial sweeteners helps as they can make some peoples poo very soft and harder to control.
- If you are really struggling with bowel control you could see your GP for advice about medication to help alter the consistency of your poo whilst also doing your exercises.
- The anal sphincter is part of the pelvic floor muscles. If these other muscles are weak they also can lead to poor control of bowels. You may also need to do general pelvic floor exercises. See the heading 'other information' for details.

How to effectively go for a poo

- The better you can completely empty your bowels the less likely you are to leak. Take your time and do not rush. When you think you have finished then do some strong pull ups of your muscles before you wipe your bottom.
- Try using the position shown in the picture below to sit on the toilet. If you do not have a footstool you could use some books.
- This position helps the pelvic floor muscles relax and can help some people empty better.
- Sit properly on the toilet seat, don't hover.
- Have your feet apart and up on a footstool, with your forearms resting on your knees.



Image provided by the Multiple Sclerosis Trust.
Used with permission.

- Keep your tummy relaxed.
- Avoid holding your breath.
- A slight initial bearing down will help the poo open the anus, but do not strain.

Other information

See our information leaflet 'Tips for your bowel problems'.

Download from: <http://foi.avon.nhs.uk/download.aspx?did=6329>

Or scan the QR code:



The Pelvic Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy Network have lots of further information on their website here: https://thepogp.co.uk/patient_information/default.aspx or scan the QR code:



We recommend looking at:

- Pelvic floor exercises for women.
- Pelvic floor exercises for men.

Notes

Based on information by Milton Keynes University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust. With thanks.

As well as providing clinical care, our Trust has an important role in research. This allows us to discover new and improved ways of treating patients.

While under our care, you may be invited to take part in research. To find out more please visit: www.uhbw.nhs.uk

Help us prevent the spread of infection in hospital. Please make sure your hands are clean. Wash and dry them thoroughly/use the gel provided. If you have been unwell in the last 48 hours please consider whether your visit is essential.

Smoking is the primary cause of preventable illness and premature death. For support in stopping smoking contact **NHS Smokefree on 0300 123 1044.**

Drinkline is the national alcohol helpline. If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline in complete confidence. **Drinkline on 0300 123 1110.**

To access all patient leaflets and information please go to the following address:
<http://foi.avon.nhs.uk/>

Bristol switchboard: 0117 923 0000
Weston switchboard: 01934 636 363
www.uhbw.nhs.uk



For an interpreter or signer please contact the telephone number on your appointment letter.



For this leaflet in large print or PDF format, please email patientleaflets@uhbw.nhs.uk.

