



# Bowel control problems/anal incontinence

## Patient information guide

### Background

- About 10% of adults have problems with bowel control, but many people find it hard to talk about.
- These problems can range from passing wind at the wrong time to not being able to prevent solid stool escaping the anus (back passage).
- Some people only have short-term problems, such as after food poisoning.
- Around 6% of adults use pads to manage their bowel control problems.
- These can be bought at most pharmacies.
- Bowel problems can affect daily life and cause embarrassment.
- This leaflet gives basic information and encourages people to speak to their doctor, as simple treatments can often help.

### Who gets bowel problems?

- Older people are affected more often than younger people.
- Women are more likely than men, especially after having children.
- Pregnancy can weaken the muscles and nerves in the pelvis.
- Childbirth, especially if forceps are used, can sometimes damage the muscles that control the back passage.
- More than half of people who have bowel control problems also have problems with leaking urine (pee).
- People who have trouble moving around (reduced movement) can also be affected. Severe constipation can build up and cause “overflow” leakage from the back passage.
- Some people develop problems after surgery on the anus (for example for piles or fistulas), or after an injury.
- Severe diarrhoea from infections or bowel conditions can also cause accidents, but this often improves once the illness is treated.

### How can bowel control be improved?

#### Diet changes

- Avoid spicy foods and foods that cause diarrhoea
- Cut down on alcohol (especially beer) and caffeinated drinks

- Some people find that eating less fibre makes stools smaller, firmer, and easier to control.
- For people with reduced movement, if there is a build-up of stool (poo), a doctor may suggest:
  - More fibre
  - A laxative
  - Suppositories (such as bisacodyl) to help the bowel empty more effectively.
- If you often have loose or watery stools (poo), speak to your doctor to check for any causes, such as a bowel infection.
- Once this is ruled out, your doctor may give medicines to help firm your stool, such as loperamide or codeine phosphate. A Pharmacist can help you find the right dose.
- Some people only need to take these medicines when they are going out for the day.

## Bowel training

You can train your bowels to empty better in the morning, which may reduce leakage later in the day.

- Have a hot drink (like tea) when you wake up
- A suppository may help the bowel start moving
- When you feel the need, go to the toilet straight away and take your time
- It may take about 4 - 5 minutes to fully empty
- Sit with your feet supported and lean forward slightly
- Don't rush - give your body time to finish
- Emptying your bowels well in the morning can help prevent leakage later.

## Physiotherapy

If your pelvic floor muscles are weak, exercises can help make them stronger and improve bowel control.

A Physiotherapist may also use:

- Biofeedback (to help you learn how to use the muscles better)
- Irrigation (a way of helping the bowel empty more effectively)

Your doctor can refer you to a Physiotherapist or Continence Specialist who will teach you these exercises.

## Treatment of more severe bowel control problems

If the simple measures described above have not helped, your doctor may refer you to a Bowel Specialist.

The Specialist will:

- Talk with you about possible causes of your problems
- Examine your bottom
- Check the strength of your sphincter muscles
- Look inside the lower bowel with a small tube to check for inflammation.

They may also do tests to:

- Check the nerves that control the bowel muscles
- Take scans of the sphincter muscles.

### Percutaneous Tibial Nerve Stimulation (PTNS)

- Neuromodulation uses gentle electrical pulses to stimulate the tibial nerve in your lower leg
- It is done as an outpatient procedure (you do not stay overnight in hospital).

### Sphincter repair

- If tests show a gap in the anal sphincter muscle, your Specialist may discuss whether surgery to repair it could help you.

### Sacral nerve stimulation

- For severe bowel control problems, a Specialist may suggest sacral nerve stimulation.
- This involves placing a small wire under the skin of your lower back.
- The wire sends gentle electrical signals to the sacral nerves to help improve control of the anal muscles.
- It is only done in specialist centres.

### Urinary incontinence

- Some people have both urinary leakage and bowel control problems
- These are usually treated by different Specialists
- If you have both, speak to your Doctor about whether you need referrals to both types of Specialist.

## Resources

### Bladder and Bowel Community (B&BC)

Provides information and support services.

Website: [www.bladderandbowel.org](http://www.bladderandbowel.org) Email: [help@bladderandbowel.org](mailto:help@bladderandbowel.org)

### Bladder and Bowel UK

Provides information and support services.

Website: [www.bbuk.org.uk/](http://www.bbuk.org.uk/) Email: [bbuk@disabledliving.co.uk](mailto:bbuk@disabledliving.co.uk)

Telephone: 0161 214 4591

### Bladder Health UK

Provides information and support services, including a chat forum and active social media.

Website: [www.bladderhealthuk.org/](http://www.bladderhealthuk.org/) Email: [info@bladderhealth.org](mailto:info@bladderhealth.org)

Telephone: 0121 702 0820

### International Urogynaecology Association (IUGA)

Provides evidence-based patient information translated into several languages.

Website: [www.yourpelvicfloor.org/conditions/](http://www.yourpelvicfloor.org/conditions/)

### Pelvic, Obstetric & Gynaecological Physiotherapy (POGP)

Provides evidence-based patient information which may be recited (audio) in many languages.

Website: [www.thepogp.co.uk/patient\\_information/default.aspx](http://www.thepogp.co.uk/patient_information/default.aspx)

## Contact our service

### Whittington Bladder and Bowel Care Service

Email: [whh-tr.bladderandbowel@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.bladderandbowel@nhs.net)

Tel: 020 3316 8401/8398 (Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5pm).

### Whittington Pelvic Health Physiotherapy

Email: [whh-tr.outpatienttherapy@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.outpatienttherapy@nhs.net)

Tel: 020 7288 5660 (Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm). Please be aware that due to workload we may take several days to respond.

### North central London perinatal pelvic health service - Royal Free London

Email: [rf-tr.nclpphs@nhs.net](mailto:rf-tr.nclpphs@nhs.net)

Tel: 020 7443 9757 (Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm).

## Contact our Trust

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on **020 7288 5551** or [whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net).

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet, please email [whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net). We will try our best to meet your needs.

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## Document information

Date published: 05/06/2026 | Review date: 05/06/2028 | Ref: ACS/B&B/BCPAI/04

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