

# Exercising your sphincter muscles to help improve bowel control

## Pelvic Floor Service

Information for Patients

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### Introduction

Sphincter exercises can help you to improve your bowel control. When done correctly, these exercises can build up and strengthen the muscles to help you hold both gas and poo in the bottom.

### Where are these muscles?

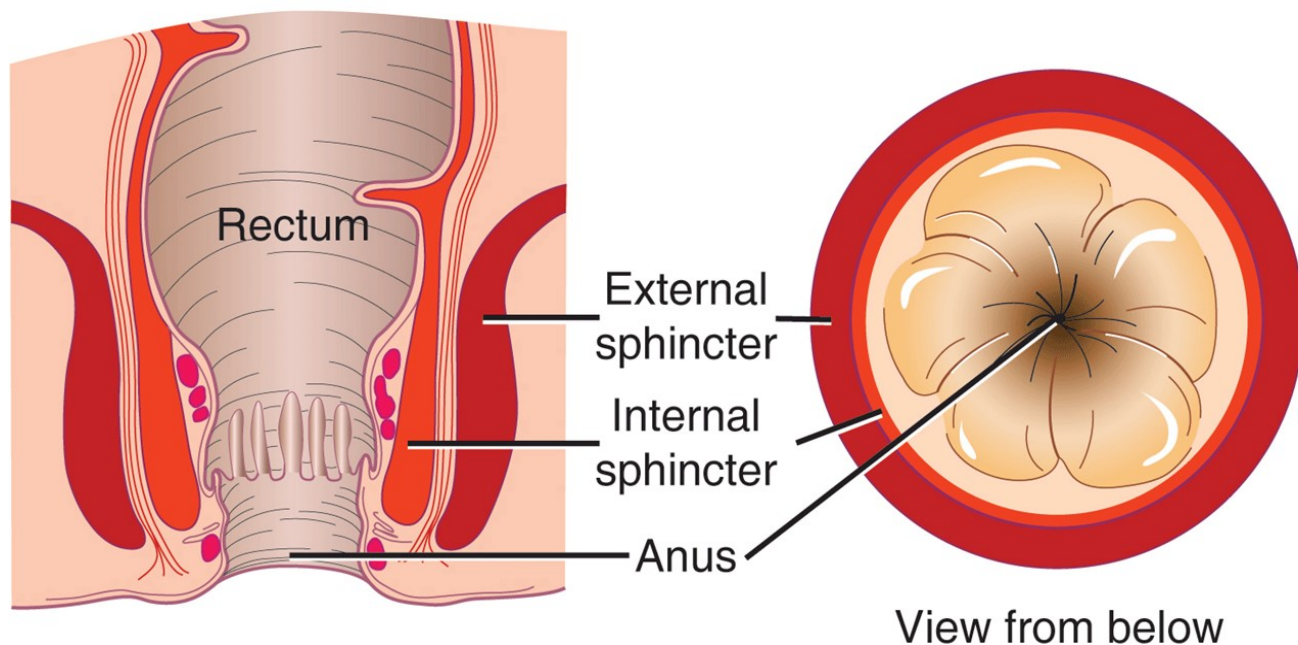


Image with permission from St Mark's Hospital, London

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
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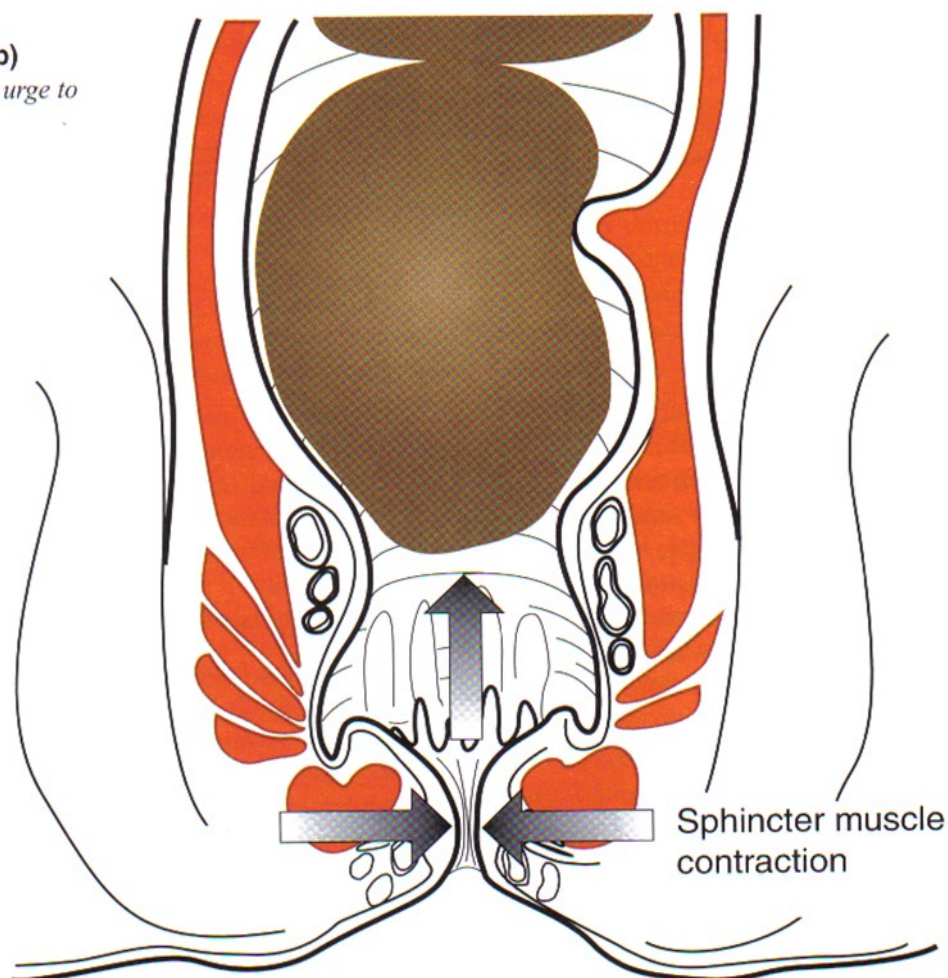
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The inner ring is the **internal sphincter** muscle which should be closed at all times, except when you are actually trying to do a poo. This is something that happens naturally. You do not have to think about it.

The outer ring of muscle is the **external sphincter** muscle, which can tighten up to close it more firmly if you have urgency or diarrhoea.

Both muscles wrap around the bottom (anus). When a poo comes into the rectum the internal anal sphincter relaxes and allows the poo to enter the top part of the anus. Sensitive nerves lower down in the anal canal can tell you if it is gas or poo waiting to come out. If it is a poo, you squeeze the external anal sphincter to stop it from coming straight out. This squeezing moves the poo back up into the rectum, where it waits until you get to the toilet.

**Figure 6.3(b)**  
*Resisting the urge to defaecate.*



53

Image courtesy of St Mark's Hospital

Either or both of these sphincter muscles can become weak by:

- pregnancy and childbirth.
- constipation and straining.
- effects of aging
- conditions that affect the brain and or nerves (neurological disorders) such as Parkinson's, stroke

If you have weak muscles, you cannot squeeze enough to hold on, which will make the sensation more urgent and you may leak gas, liquid or even a solid poo. This is called urge faecal incontinence.

If the inner ring muscle is weak you may notice that you leak poo without any sensation of needing to go. This is called passive faecal incontinence.

## How can exercises help?

Exercises can strengthen the outer ring muscles so that they once again give support. This will improve your bowel control and improve or stop leakage of gas or poo. As with any muscle in the body the more you use and exercise them, the stronger the sphincter muscles will be. As the muscle thickens in time it can help to compensate for weakness in the inner ring.

## Learning to do the exercises

Once you have had a first assessment of your condition and problem, you will be taught how to do the exercise correctly. Stop if the exercise causes pain.

### The following tips may help:

1. Start with squeezing the back passage. Imagine you are trying to:
  - stop yourself passing wind from the bowel.
  - wink the back passage to close it off.
  - crinkle the skin around the back passage.
  - hold a string of spaghetti in the back passage (no actual spaghetti needed).
2. Squeeze as hard as you can. The muscle may tire quickly. Now try squeezing more gently (about 50% of your previous effort) this may help you hold the muscle on for longer.
3. Now try lifting the back passage inwards and forwards towards the lower tummy while keeping the opening squeezed closed. This should be as you breathe out. It may feel like the back passage is moving away from your chair. This should now feel like you are trying to stop wee as well as wind.

## Long holds

Hold the squeeze for up to 10 seconds at a time. Relax for 10 seconds.

Repeat this up to 10 times or until the muscles feel tired.

This will help to improve your **strength and tone**.

## Submaximal holds

Hold the squeeze at half or 50% effort for up to 10 seconds. Relax for 10 seconds. Repeat this up to 10 times or until the muscles feel tired.

This will help to improve your **endurance** and allow you to hold off from the toilet for longer

## Quick squeezes

Squeeze your muscles then relax them straight away. This should be at a speed of about 1 second on: 1 second off. Repeat x 10 to 20 or until tired.

This will help to improve your **power and speed** which is important to reduce the impact of things like coughing and running.

## Practice these 3 times a day.

Start lying, then sitting, then gradually move to standing and walking.

If you find the exercise tricky try doing the squeeze and lift parts of the exercise separately to start with.

Make sure you **do not**:

- tighten your buttocks.
- Hold your breath.
- tighten stomach (abdominal) muscles.

If you do any of these things, you are **not** exercising correctly.

As the muscles get stronger, you will find you can hold for longer and/or that you can do more pull ups each time without the muscles getting tired.

It takes time for exercise to make muscles stronger. You may need to exercise every day for several months before the muscle gain their full strength.

If you stop doing your exercises, your muscles will weaken quickly and your symptoms may return.

## Tips to help you

1. It will be a good idea to set a time for these exercises and really focus on getting them right. With time, they should become easy to do wherever you are.
2. Get into the habit of doing your exercises with things you do every day for example, when your hands are in water, every time you answer the phone, when you are in the office.
3. If you are not sure that you are squeezing the right muscle, put a finger on the back passage as you squeeze to check. You should feel a gentle lift and squeeze if you are exercising correctly. Or look at the area in a mirror, you should see the back passage pucker up as you squeeze it.
4. Use your muscles when you need them, pull up the muscles if you feel that you are about to leak. Remember that you cannot hold your tightest squeeze for very long. You are better to use a gentle squeeze that you can hold for longer. Your control will improve with time.
5. Get into the habit of pulling in your muscles at the same time as things like coughing, sneezing, lifting, jumping.
6. Watch your weight, extra weight puts extra strain on your muscles.
7. Once you have gained control of your bowel, do not forget your exercises. Continue to do them a few times each day to make sure the problem does not come back.

## Contact details

Pelvic Floor Colorectal Conservative Management Clinic - 0116 258 3775. Messages can be left and will be picked up in working hours.

For any urgent advice please speak to your GP or call 111.

## Do you have any questions?

This information leaflet is to teach you how to control your anal sphincter to improve your bowel control. If you have problems doing the exercises, or if you do not understand any part of this information sheet, ask your physiotherapist, doctor or nurse.

- Do your exercise regularly.
- Have faith in them.
- You should begin to see good results in a few weeks.

## Special instructions

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Reference: <https://www.stmarkshospital.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Anal-sphincter-exercises-for-leakage.pdf>

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