

Having a perianal abscess drained

Department of General Surgery

Information for Patients

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What is a perianal abscess?

An abscess is a painful build up of pus that is caused by a bacterial infection. When bacteria enters your body, your immune system sends infection fighting white blood cells to the area. When white blood cells attack the bacteria, some nearby tissues die. This makes a hole which then fills with pus. The creates an abscess. The pus is a mixture of dead tissue, white blood cells and bacteria.

A perianal abscess is a build up of pus found near the anus or rectum. The rectum is part of the lower intestine that stores poo (faeces). The anus is the opening in your bottom that lets poo out of your body.

What causes a perianal abscess?

It is most often caused by an infection of a small gland just inside the anus. Most abscesses occur in people who are healthy and there is no obvious reason why it has happened. However, conditions that may increase your risk are:

- inflammatory bowel disease
- diabetes
- conditions or treatments causing a low immune system (such as HIV, steroid treatment or chemotherapy)

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What are the symptoms of a perianal abscess?

- constant pain in the bottom. This is not always related to going to the toilet (when needing a poo).
- swelling close to the anus.
- pus coming from the skin or anus.
- a high temperature and feeling unwell.

How is an abscess treated?

If the infection is found very early or has already burst we may try to treat it with antibiotics. However most will need an operation to drain the pus. This is most often done under a general anaesthetic (you will be asleep). You will see this written on the consent forms as an 'incision and drainage of perianal abscess' or may be seen abbreviated to 'I+D of a perianal abscess'.

What happens if I need surgery?

The surgeon will make a cut (incision) in the abscess to let the pus drain out. They may remove a small piece of skin to make a wider opening. The skin opening will be left open (the skin is not stitched shut) so if any more pus is produced it can drain away easily. If the abscess is deep, they may place dressing (pack) inside the wound. This is so the skin is kept open to let the deeper tissues heal first. This can help stop the abscess forming again.

Depending on the size of the space where the abscess was (cavity), the wound may take several weeks to fully heal up. The surgery will leave a scar.

If a perianal abscess is not drained it can keep growing. This will cause more pain and a larger cavity. There will be more risk of spreading the infection.

A member of the surgical team will talk to you before the surgery. You can ask any questions before signing a consent form.

Are there risks?

The risks of serious complications are very low but the following can happen:

- **Bleeding:** You will get some minor bleeding. This is because the wound is open. Bleeding that needs treatment to stop it is rare.
- **Infection:** You do not normally need antibiotics once the abscess is drained. However if the skin around the wound starts to become red or hot, you should have the wound checked by your GP or at a walk in center.
- **Damage to the sphincter muscle:** The sphincter muscles help you control when you poo. Rarely, these muscles can be damaged by infection or surgery. This means you may leak mucus or may find it difficult to hold on to wind. This problem is often temporary and will settle down in time.

- **Will it happen again?** Sometimes perianal abscesses can come back. If the wound does not fully heal up or continues to leak fluid, you may have a condition called an anal fistula. This is where an abnormal connection has formed between the lining of the anal canal and your skin. If you are worried about how your wound is healing, please see your GP. They will refer you to a hospital outpatient clinic if needed.
- **Scarring:** You will have a scar where the wound healed.

Going home after surgery for an abscess

You can go home on the same day as your surgery, unless you need other treatment or you have had a general anaesthetic and live alone.

Dressings

- You will need to have regular follow up in the community.
- You will need to phone your GP surgery to make an appointment with the practice nurse for dressings after you have gone home.
- Not all GP surgeries can help with dressing changes.
- If your GP surgery cannot help with dressings you will need to phone NHS 111. They will make you an appointment in a local walk-in centre.
- If you have a pack in the wound this will need to be changed regularly.
- We will talk to you about these arrangements before you go home.
- You will be given a few days supply of dressings. Further dressings will be given to you in the community.
- **Wound bleeding and discharge:** It is common to see some bleeding after drainage. This is because wounds are left to heal on their own and are not stitched. You might notice small amounts of blood when wiping, drying or when changing dressings. It is common to get some fluid discharge when open wounds are healing. Wearing a small pad will protect your underwear. Small amounts are fine, but if the bleeding or discharge increases and is painful you should contact your doctor.
- **Washing:** most people are able to bath and shower normally. In the early stages after surgery, sitting in a warm bath with a tablespoon of salt in the bathwater (sitz bath) can be very soothing, especially before any dressing changes. You should not use perfumed soaps when washing. We suggest dabbing the area dry with a towel or using a hairdryer on cool setting.
- **Medication:** We will give you painkillers when you are on the ward and to go home with if needed. We will talk about your medications with you before you go home.

- **Diet:** It is important to eat and drink normally when you have gone home. You should have a balanced diet with plenty of fluids to keep your poo soft. You should not miss meals to stop yourself from having a poo.
- **Poo:** Try not to push hard when pooing. Keeping your poo soft will help you with this. Your doctor may recommend a softener to take after you have gone home. This should help reduce discomfort when going to the toilet. You should take this until it feels comfortable to poo.
- **Driving:** You must wait at least 24 hours before driving after your operation if you have had a general anaesthetic. You must be able to fully control your vehicle. You should be able to comfortably perform an emergency stop before you drive.
- **Work:** You can return to work when you feel ready. This might depend on your particular type of abscess, the job you do and the need to have your dressings changed. Most patients feel uncomfortable after anal surgery for a few days. Heavy lifting, bending and sitting for long periods may be difficult. Your surgeon can talk to you about how much time you should have off work. You can self-certificate for 1 week but if you need longer than this the hospital will give you with a fit-note if needed. Please let your nurse or doctors know if you need a fit-note before going home.

Will I need a follow-up appointment?

Most abscesses heal without any problems. You will usually not need to be seen in hospital again. If we think you do need to be seen again, we will arrange an appointment for you.

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