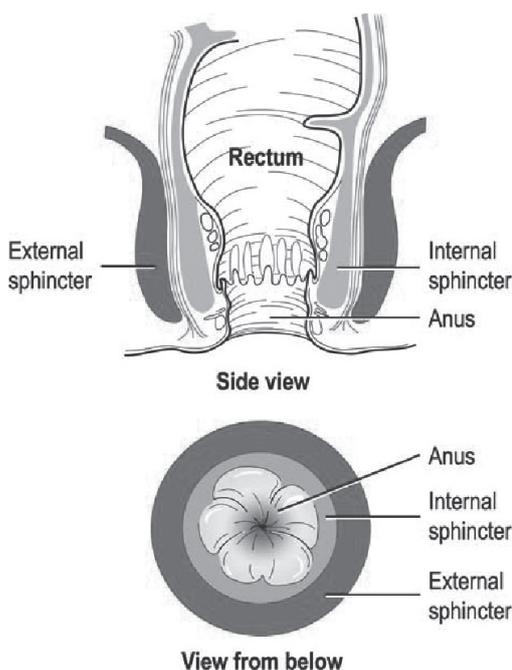


**Faecal incontinence (leaking faeces from the bottom) is much more common than people think, but it is not something that is talked about openly. However there are continence nurses and doctors who specialise in helping people to overcome problems with their bowel control and you can ask your GP for a referral to this service. This factsheet describes exercises which may help you regain control. There are also some medicines which may help, if necessary.**

## How your bottom works



There are two rings of muscle wrapped around the anus, called 'sphincters'. When a stool (faeces, poo) comes into the rectum one of the muscles relaxes and allows the stool to enter the anus. Sensitive nerve endings in the anus can tell you if it is gas or stool waiting to come out. If it is stool, you squeeze the second muscle to stop it from coming straight out.

The squeezing moves the stool back into the rectum, where it waits until you get to the toilet. You may not be able to squeeze enough to hang on if your muscles are weak or have been damaged by surgery, or they do not squeeze in the correct order or the nerve supply to the muscles is damaged.

There are many different reasons why you might develop bowel leakage or incontinence following treatment for bowel cancer. For example, surgery which involves removing part of the bowel, shortening it or changing its shape, will affect its normal working pattern. It can also change how sensitive the nerve endings around the bowel area are, or in rare cases, cause damage to the anus – the sphincter muscle which forms the entry into your rectum (back passage).

Chemotherapy treatments can also cause side effects in the bowel, and these can take some time to settle down again. In a few cases, radiotherapy treatments can also cause short term and longer term changes to the way you are used to your bowel working.

Whatever the reason, having a problem controlling your bowels can be upsetting. If you have had the distressing experience of a bowel accident in public, you will be acutely aware of the feeling of any pressure or filling sensation in your rectum (back passage) which might mean you will need to find a toilet quickly. It is a natural reaction to try and prevent an accident by either tensing all your muscles and holding your breath or rushing to find a toilet. A better course of action is to sit or stand still, breathe deeply and contract your anal sphincter until the urge passes.

Most people find that their emotions have an influence on their bowels. If you are worried or anxious it can lead to more frequent, more urgent, and looser bowel actions. If you panic when your bowel is full, this can cause the sense of urgency to become even stronger. Your rectum, your sphincter muscles and your confidence need retraining to help you overcome this problem.

## Learning to control your sphincter muscles

Exercises can strengthen these muscles so that they give support again. This will improve your bowel control and improve or stop leakage of gas or stool. Like any other muscles in the body, the more you use and exercise them, the stronger they will be.



## Beating Bowel Cancer

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1. Imagine that your sphincter muscle is a lift. When you squeeze as tightly as you can, your lift goes up to the fourth floor. But you cannot hold it there for very long, and it will not get you safely to the toilet as the muscle will get tired very quickly. So now squeeze more gently and take your lift only up to the second floor. Feel how much longer you can hold it than at the maximum squeeze. You may not be able to do this at first. If the urge is too strong, start by trying to delay bowel emptying once you are sitting on the toilet. See how long you can wait until you really have to let go.
2. Sit on the toilet and hold on for as long as you can before opening your bowels. If you can only manage a few seconds, don't worry, it will become easier with practice. You might find it easier if you try to relax and concentrate on breathing very calmly. It may be helpful to take something to read.
3. Once you are able to delay opening your bowels for a few minutes, the unpleasant urge to go then disappears. Get up and leave the toilet. Return a few minutes later when there is no urge and try to open your bowels.

Gradually you will find that you can increase the distance and time away from the toilet. The more you practise this and the sphincter exercises below, the sooner it will happen.

Eventually you should find that you are regaining control of your bowels. The longer you can hold on, the more fluid is absorbed from the stools and so the firmer and less urgent they become. When you have some successes, you will become more confident. The less you panic, the easier it is to make the urge go away.

### Sphincter exercises

1. Sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart. Now imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind from your bowel. To do this you must squeeze the muscle around your back passage. Try squeezing and lifting that muscle as tightly as you can, as if you are really worried that you are about to leak. You should be able to feel the muscle move. Your buttocks, tummy and legs should not move much at all. You should be aware of the skin around your back passage tightening and being pulled up and away from your chair. You should not need to hold your breath when you tighten these muscles.

2. Tighten and pull up the sphincter muscles as tightly as you can. Hold for at least five seconds and then relax for at least 10 seconds. Repeat at least five times. This will work on the strength of your muscles.
3. Pull the muscles up to about half of their maximum squeeze. See how long you can hold this. Then relax for at least 10 seconds. Repeat at least five times. This will work on the endurance or staying power of your muscles.
4. Pull up the muscles as quickly and tightly as you can, then relax, and then pull up again. See how many times you can do this before you get tired. Try for at least five quick pull-ups.

Do these exercises at least 10 times every day. As the muscles get stronger, you will find that you can hold for longer than five seconds, and that you can do more pull-ups each time without the muscles getting tired. Remember that you cannot hold your tightest squeeze for very long, so it is better to use a gentle squeeze that you can hold for longer. Your control will gradually improve. You may need to exercise regularly for several months before the muscles gain their full strength and continue to exercise to maintain your bowel control.

### Diet and medicines can affect your bowel too

There are some foods and medicines that can affect how loose or firm your stools are and it may take a bit of time to work out which ones might be adding to or helping the problem.

You can find more information in our booklet '**Living With Bowel Cancer – Eating Well**'.

Other useful contacts:

#### Bladder and Bowel Foundation

[www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org](http://www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org)  
Helpline 0845 345 0165

#### St Marks Hospital

<http://www.stmarkshospital.nhs.uk/patients-visitors/patient-information-leaflets/>

The **National Key Scheme** offers independent access to around 7,000 locked public toilets around the country. [www.disabilityrightsuk.org](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org)

*This factsheet has been produced in conjunction with Dr Jervoise Andreyev (Consultant Gastroenterologist, The Royal Marsden Hospital NHS Foundation Trust).*



If you have any questions or comments about this publication, or would like information on the evidence used to produce it, please write to us or email [info@beatingbowelcancer.org](mailto:info@beatingbowelcancer.org).

