



Education

Hemorrhoids

What are hemorrhoids?

Hemorrhoids are swollen veins and tissue in the lower rectum and anus. The anus is at the end of the rectum and is the opening through which bowel movements pass from your body. Hemorrhoids are a common problem. Another name for them is piles.

Hemorrhoids may be internal (inside the rectum) or external (around the anus). Internal hemorrhoids are often painless but they sometimes cause a lot of bleeding. The internal veins may stretch and even fall down (prolapse) through the anus to outside the body. The veins may then become irritated and painful. External hemorrhoids can be seen or felt easily around the anal opening. When the swollen veins are scratched or broken by straining, rubbing, or wiping, they sometimes bleed.

How do they occur?

Veins in the rectum and around the anus tend to swell under pressure. Hemorrhoids can result from too much pressure on these veins. You may put pressure on these veins by:

- straining to have a bowel movement when you are constipated
- waiting too long to have a bowel movement
- sitting for a long time on the toilet, which causes strain on the anal area
- coughing and sneezing often
- sitting for a long while.

Hemorrhoids may also develop from:

- diarrhea
- obesity
- injury to the anus, for example, from anal intercourse
- some liver diseases.

Flare-ups of hemorrhoids may occur during periods of stress. Some people inherit a tendency to have hemorrhoids.

Pregnant women should try to avoid becoming constipated because they are more likely to have hemorrhoids during pregnancy. In the last trimester of pregnancy, the enlarged uterus may press on blood vessels and cause hemorrhoids. Also, the strain of childbirth sometimes causes hemorrhoids after the birth.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of hemorrhoids include:

- itching, mild burning, and bleeding around the anus (for example, you might see bright red blood on toilet paper after wiping)
 - swelling and tenderness around the anus
 - pain with bowel movements
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- painful lumps around the anus ranging in size from a pea to a walnut (in severe cases).

How are they diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine your rectum and anus. Your provider may use a special light tool called a proctoscope or anoscope to look inside the rectum.

How is it treated?

The following treatments usually help to relieve most cases of hemorrhoids:

- **High-fiber diet** Eat more high-fiber foods, which will help prevent constipation. The best sources of fiber are whole-grain cereals, such as shredded wheat or cereals with bran. Fresh fruit and raw or cooked vegetables, especially asparagus, cabbage, carrots, corn, and broccoli are other good sources of fiber.
- **Fluids** Drink plenty of water. This helps to soften bowel movements so they are easier to pass.
- **Sitz baths and cold packs** Sitting in lukewarm water 2 or 3 times a day for 15 minutes cleans the anal area and may relieve discomfort. (If the bath water is too hot, swelling around the anus will get worse.) Also, you might try putting a cloth-covered ice pack on the anus for 10 minutes, 4 times a day.
- **Medications** For mild discomfort, your health care provider may prescribe a cream or ointment for the painful area. The cream may contain witch hazel, zinc oxide, or petroleum jelly. Your provider may also prescribe medicated suppositories to put inside the rectum.
- **Procedures and surgeries** A number of procedures can be used to remove or shrink hemorrhoids. If you have protruding internal hemorrhoids, your health care provider can do a procedure called hemorrhoid banding. Your provider will put a tight band around the enlarged vein and either cut the hemorrhoid open, remove any blood clots, and let the vein heal, or let the hemorrhoid dry up and fall off. This method is effective in most cases. Other methods include destroying the hemorrhoid with freezing, electrical or laser heat, or infrared light. Or your provider may shrink the hemorrhoid by injecting a chemical around the swollen vein. For severe cases of hemorrhoids, a surgical procedure called a hemorrhoidectomy may be done. For this procedure you are first given an anesthetic to prevent you from feeling pain. Then your provider cuts the inflamed parts of the hemorrhoids and removes them.

How long will the effects last?

Usually hemorrhoids do not pose a danger to your health. In most cases the symptoms go away in a few days. The painful lumps of more severe cases should get better in a couple of weeks.

How can I take care of myself?

Always tell your health care provider when you have rectal bleeding. Although bleeding may be from hemorrhoids, more serious illnesses, such as colon cancer, can also cause bleeding.

Follow these guidelines to help prevent hemorrhoids and to relieve their discomfort:

- Do not strain during bowel movements. The straining makes hemorrhoids swell.
- Follow your high-fiber diet and drink plenty of water. If necessary, take a stool softener, such as Haley's M-O, psyllium, Metamucil or Citrucel, or mineral oil. Softer stools make it easier to empty the bowels and reduce pressure on the veins.
- Don't overuse laxatives. Diarrhea can be as irritating to the anus as constipation.
- Ask your health care provider what nonprescription product you should buy to relieve pain and itching. Also, ask about any side effects of any medications prescribed for you.
- Exercise regularly to help prevent constipation.
- Avoid a lot of wiping after a bowel movement if you have hemorrhoids. Wiping with soft, moist toilet paper (or a commercial moist pad or baby wipe) may relieve discomfort. If necessary, shower instead of wiping, then dry the anus gently.
- Avoid lifting heavy objects when you have hemorrhoids. It may increase the pressure on the veins and make the hemorrhoids worse.

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