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Education

Anal Fistula

What is an anal fistula?

An anal fistula is an abnormal tunnel between the anal canal and the outer skin of the anus. The anus is the opening of the rectum where bowel movements (BMs) leave the body.

How does it occur?

An anal fistula usually results from an infection that forms in the tissue lining the anal canal. The infection may be caused by the bacteria that normally exist in the rectum. Sometimes an anal fistula may occur as a result of:

- a healed sore in the rectal area
- ulcerative colitis, a disease that damages the colon and rectum
- diverticulitis, inflammation of small, harmless pouches in the wall of the intestines
- Crohn's disease, a chronic inflammation of the intestines
- tuberculosis of the bowel
- gonorrhea in the rectum
- cancer of the large intestine.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of anal fistula may include:

- itching
- discharge of watery pus
- irritation of the skin around the anus
- pain
- leakage of stool between bowel movements.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health provider will review your symptoms and examine you. You may have one or more of the following procedures:

- anoscopy, a procedure in which your provider inserts an instrument with a light into the rectum to look at the anus and lower part of the rectum
- sigmoidoscopy, a procedure in which your health care provider uses a flexible or rigid scope to inspect the lower part of the intestine for inflammation or disease
- a biopsy to check for inflammation or cancer
- lower gastrointestinal (GI) series, a procedure that uses a special fluid to show the intestines better on x-ray.

How is it treated?

The procedure used to treat an anal fistula is called a fistulotomy. Your health care provider opens the infected area and allows the fistula to drain. Stitches usually are not needed.

Small or shallow fistulas may be treated in your health care provider's office after you are given a local anesthetic to numb the area. Larger fistulas must be treated surgically under regional or general anesthesia. If the fistula is complex and goes through both anal sphincter muscles, more than one procedure may be necessary.

After a fistulotomy, your health care provider will prescribe stool softeners and rest. In addition, your provider may prescribe antibiotics to fight any infection.

How long will the effects last?

An anal fistula usually lasts until it is surgically removed.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow your health care provider's instructions.

Caring for yourself at home after surgery may include:

- using stool softeners
- adding fiber to your diet
- drinking plenty of water
- taking warm baths
- using clean, moist pads to wipe the area around the anus to remove irritating particles and fluid from the fistula
- using special skin creams to soothe irritated tissue.

How can I help prevent an anal fistula?

There is no known way to prevent an anal fistula. However, there are ways to try to keep your lower GI tract healthy.

- Eat food high in fiber.
- Drink plenty of water.

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