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**PATIENT INFORMATION:  
EXERCISES FOR BOWEL  
CONTROL**

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Leakage from the back passage (anus) affects at least 1 in 200 people, this figure could be higher as many people are reluctant to discuss their symptoms or to ask for help due to embarrassment.

Sometimes the sphincters and pelvic floor muscles become weak. This may be due to loading strains at times of constipation, heavy lifting, childbirth for women, or simply as part of the aging process which affects the skin around muscle fibres, which can weaken over time. The muscles however will continue to strengthen for as long as you are working them.

If these muscles become weak, you will find that your bowels become more urgent and that you are unable to close the back passage firmly enough to control the escape of gas, loose stool or firm motions. These can be miserable symptoms for you, but exercise will help to improve bowel control.

It is very important that you mention any change in your bowel habit or loss of control of your bowels to your Doctor so that while you are working to improve your symptoms, they may also be investigated for any underlying cause.

### **Abdominal recruitment:**

These muscles help the pelvic floor work at about 30% stronger when you recruit them as well. Use them when you are walking, these are postural muscles and support your back as well as the pelvic floor.

Let your stomach relax, breathe in gently and as you breathe out, gently draw in the lower part of your stomach. You should be able to breathe and hold these muscles while you walk around.

Remember that these exercises must be practiced daily. If you miss days out or don't do the number of repetitions daily the muscles will revert to the way they were before. Initially they may tire easily, so rest between contractions. You will need to do at least 30 of each of the contractions daily to strengthen the weak muscles. Isolate the muscles to the pelvic floor only and breathe normally. You will soon be able to do them while you are doing other things. Choose triggers throughout the day to link the exercises with to remember to do them regularly.

### **Functional work:**

It also helps to anticipate activities which will cause downward pressure on the pelvic floor. Use the strength in both the pelvic floor and abdominal muscles to support the anal sphincter in advance of coughing, sneezing, lifting, getting up from a chair etc. to minimise the loss of wind or any leakage from the back passage.

### **The anal sphincter:**

The anus has two rings of muscle around it. The inner ring is the internal anal sphincter. It normally remains closed until you choose to pass a motion. It opens and closes automatically according to signals from the bowel and you don't have to think about it.

The outer ring is the external anal sphincter, made in part of voluntary muscle which means you can control it. It too works in response to signals from the bowel and you can tighten this one more firmly by squeezing the sphincter voluntarily.

When a stool passes into the lower bowel (rectum), the internal sphincter relaxes, and sensors inside sample the contents of the rectum, giving you information if the rectum is filling, about whether it is gas or stool to be passed. If it is not a convenient time, by tightening the external sphincter you should be able to control wind or delay the bowel action. The action of the tightened sphincter helps to move the stool further back into the rectum until it is more convenient to pass a motion.

Pull up the pelvic floor very quickly as if you were taking in sharp breath to cough, hold as if you were coughing, then relax and repeat five times. Integrate these exercises with some fast pulses, these are to keep you continent if you wish to do something more energetic like jumping on a trampoline, the pelvic floor would need to brace every time you land. You will need a strong pelvic floor to maintain continence whilst doing these activities.

Delaying tactics:

- First stay still, pull up the pelvic floor muscles instantly. It needs to be strong enough to close the anal sphincter. Maintain this strength until you feel the contents of the bowel draw up and in. Still holding with the pelvic floor; stay calm, remind yourself of all the times you have held on before.
- Stay still, whether standing, sitting or lying.
- Pull the legs tightly together. If sitting keep both feet on the floor.
- Pull the toes up.
- If you need to, sit on something firm like the hard arm of a chair or the corner of a wall.
- Mental distraction is very powerful, when you concentrate on something else, your symptoms will calm down. Try to distract yourself.

When you feel you are in control of your bowels, say the following to yourself over and over again 'This is easy, I've held on before, I can again now and I'll be waiting another 30 seconds when I get to the toilet'. When you get in there, keep saying to yourself 'I am still waiting another 30 seconds' and only when you have sat on the toilet for another 2 seconds, then allow yourself to empty.

### **Learning to do the exercises:**

Sit or lie comfortably with your legs apart and knees bent if lying down.

Imagine stopping yourself from passing wind. Close the anal sphincter. Once you can feel the back passage drawing in, work this feeling forwards as if closing the urinary passage also. This feeling of 'tightening and lifting' internally is called the basic pelvic floor contraction.

It is important to breathe whilst doing these exercises and keep your buttock and leg muscles relaxed as you work the deep pelvic floor muscles. Feel also how the muscles 'let go' when you stop contracting them.

Once you are sure you are working these muscles correctly, you can start a strengthening programme. If you are unsure about the exercises then a specialist physiotherapist will be able to advise you.

This leaflet is for information only and should not replace advice that your relevant healthcare professional would give you. Please keep this information and use it to help you if you have any further questions or queries.