

ANAL INCONTINENCE (Bowel Movement Leakage)

Leakage of stool (anal incontinence) is a common problem as people age. This usually occurs because of weakening of the anal sphincter muscles because of aging, childbirth injury or surgery. Sometimes the anal sphincter is weakened because of a problem with the nerves that control the sphincter. Sometimes leakage is related to problems with internal hemorrhoid protrusion. Leakage often worsens if there is a problem with loose stool or diarrhea.

The anal sphincter is a very complicated structure and we have limited ability to surgically correct a weak anal sphincter. However, many people can improve the symptoms of anal incontinence if they practice an exercise that strengthens the muscles of the pelvic floor. This is called a Kegel exercise. Kegels have also been used for improvement of urinary incontinence symptoms.

This exercise involves tightening and relaxing of the pelvic floor muscles that surround the urethra (urine passageway) and anus. These muscles can be identified by trying to stop the flow of urine midstream or by trying to tighten the anal sphincter muscles. This muscle is shaped like a figure 8 with one loop around the urethra and the other around the low rectum.

Kegel exercises should be done both in a fast and slow manner. For fast Kegels, quickly squeeze tight and relax the muscle. For slow Kegels, squeeze tight the muscle for 7 to 10 seconds, then relax for 10 to 15 seconds. Do each of these Kegels 10 times 3 times daily. When you first start, you may find this difficult but you will gain strength with practice.

Another way of decreasing anal incontinence is by reducing episodes of diarrhea or loose bowel movements. This can be done by "bulking up" the bowel movement with the use of products such as Fibercon, Metamucil, Citrucel or similar bulkforming agents. These fiber products make the stool more solid by absorbing fluid in the bowel movement and reducing the irritability of the colon.

If you use the fiber tablets (calcium polycarbophil marketed as Fibercon, Fiberall, Mitrolan or Fibertab, a Costco product that is less expensive), take 2 tablets twice a day with sips of water. These type products may be less likely to cause gas and are more convenient to take for most people. However, other bulk-formers such as psyllium seed (Metamucil, Konsyl, etc) or methylcellulose (Citrucel) can also be effective. These products may be better tolerated if you start with one teaspoon mixed in a glass of water or juice and work up to heaping teaspoon once or twice daily.