

Medicine for Managers

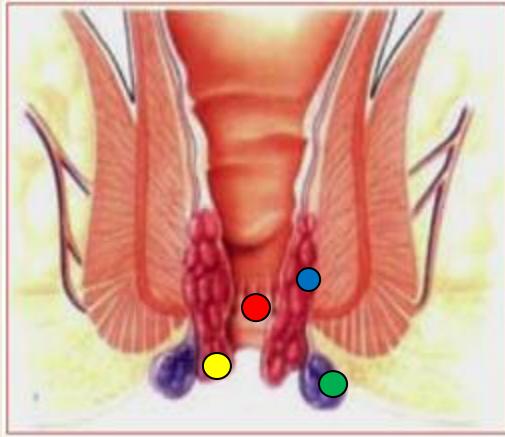
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Haemorrhoids

Haemorrhoids is one of the few medical topics guaranteed to raise a smile, but only in non-sufferers. They have provided humour for countless comedians but are singularly unfunny for those people whose lives are made uncomfortable, or worse, by their presence. So what are they and how do we deal with them?

Haemorrhoids, or piles, are swellings containing dilated veins, located around the lower rectum and the anus (back passage)



Many people are unaware of their presence whilst others will experience bleeding, usually after passing a stool, irritation around the back passage, pain due to inflammation or soreness round the anus, the passage of mucus after defaecation (passing stool) or a lump protruding from the anus. This latter symptom is due to the pile protruding from the back passage and may need to be pushed back following the passage of a stool. Sometimes sufferers will experience

the sensation that the bowel has not been properly emptied after going to the toilet.

They are common and a number of factors may increase the risk of their development.

- Being over 50
- Increased intra-abdominal pressure
 - Being too fat
 - Straining at stool
 - Pregnancy
- Severe constipation or repeated diarrhoea
- Heavy lifting
- Portal hypertension (raised pressure in the blood circulating to the liver)
- Having a family history

So, what are they?

There is a ring of muscle just inside the anus (marked with a red circle on the diagram) which is normally held contracted to keep the back passage shut so that we don't leak. Just above the muscle are a ring of veins which act as a cushion. If the veins become swollen (varicose) or inflamed, they are piles (shown at the blue

circle). If they hang down (prolapse) through the valve and protrude they become external piles (shown with a yellow circle). If the blood flow to an external pile is cut off because the valve shuts, preventing blood flow, then the blood in it clots and the pile becomes thrombosed (shown with a green circle). Thrombosed piles cause pain in the bottom.

An external haemorrhoid is less common than internal ones and is felt as a lump on the outside of the anus. If the blood clots, it can become very painful and needs draining. After a while the external pile (also called a perianal haematoma) shrivels and forms a small fibrotic skin tag.

So once you've got them, what can you do about them?

A lot depends on the severity of the symptoms. Many people have no symptoms or minimal symptoms which they can control by the use of a simple pain-relieving cream or ointment which can soothe the area round the back passage allowing easier opening of the bowels. Of course, eliminating predisposing causes will help, such as losing weight or eliminating constipation by measures such as increasing dietary fibre, using a stool softener and drinking plenty of fluids. The symptoms are usually most troublesome if the irritation is persistent or the pile becomes thrombosed. People often describe a thrombosed pile as like walking around with a marble wedged in the bottom.

Not pleasant! More persistent haemorrhoids or those causing troublesome symptoms may need treatment.

In general terms there are a lot of non-operative ways of reducing or eliminating piles.

- They can be injected with phenol. The chemical causes them to shrink and become fibrotic.
- They can be banded. A tight rubber band is placed round the pile as a ligature until it drops off.
- The pile can be frozen using a probe.
- The anus can be stretched under a general anaesthetic and this appears to help some people, although the procedure is done much less frequently these days.
- Botox or nitroglycerine cream can be used to relax the sphincter muscle to take the pressure off the prolapsed pile.

Piles can be surgically removed by a technique called haemorrhoidectomy (hem-ore-oyd-eck-toe-me). This tends to be a last resort when more conservative methods have failed or when the piles are really bad. The operation, done under local or general anaesthetic, is effective but the bottom is very sore and uncomfortable for some time after the surgery. There is a risk of complication in the form of scarring following healing.

Piles, though a popular source of humour, are not a laughing matter for sufferers. However, I can't resist quoting George Carlin, the American comedian, who asked why haemorrhoids weren't called assteroids.