

Hemorrhoids

Hemorrhoids, or piles, refer to the inflammation and swelling that can occur in the veins around the anus. They may develop either inside or outside the anus, and are often caused by straining to pass hard stools. Hemorrhoids may also be caused by pregnancy, and the tendency to have hemorrhoids is often inherited.

Most of the time, hemorrhoids cause no symptoms at all. In fact, most people have small hemorrhoids and aren't even aware of them. When there are symptoms, they may include tenderness or pain, bleeding, or a small lump at the opening to the anus. Hemorrhoids generally last several days and, unfortunately, often recur.

While not all hemorrhoids are preventable, there are three things you can do to reduce your chances of developing hemorrhoids:

1. Keep your stools soft by drinking plenty of water and eating lots of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. You might also want to add to your daily diet two tablespoons of bran or a fiber supplement, such as Metamucil.
2. Avoid sitting too much. Sitting restricts the flow of blood around your anus.
3. Try not to strain or hold your breath during bowel movements. Try to relax and to take your time.

If you develop hemorrhoids, you can get relief from the pain and itching by taking the following seven steps:

1. Keep the area clean. Try using non-perfumed baby wipes instead of toilet paper after a bowel movement. Also, try soaking in a warm bath, but avoid rubbing soap on the area.
2. Wear cotton underwear and loose clothing.
3. Apply zinc oxide paste or powder or petroleum jelly to the hemorrhoids to protect against further irritation and to ease the passage of stools.
4. Apply cold compresses or ice to the anal area four times a day, 10 minutes at a time.
5. Take sitz baths. These are hot baths with just enough water to cover the anal area.
6. Try medicated suppositories.
7. Consider using over-the-counter preparations such as Tucks, Balneol, stool softeners, or a 0.5 percent hydrocortisone cream. However, don't use ointments with local anesthetics, which can cause an allergic reaction. These ointments have the suffix "caine" in the brand name or list of ingredients.

Any relief these treatments provide is temporary, so they should be used only in addition to a proper diet and perhaps a fiber supplement to soften your stools. When stools are softened by dietary change or through the use of Metamucil, 95 percent of all people with hemorrhoids get better.

If these methods don't work, you should see your medical professional. The problem may not be hemorrhoids. Many conditions and symptoms can appear in the anal area, and some may require surgery.

You should also call your medical professional if the bleeding is heavy and mixed with the stool; if it's red or brown; if it continues for longer than a week despite home treatment; or if it occurs at a time when you're not passing stools. Also, call if the pain is severe.

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