The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
FAQ139
WOMEN'S HEALTH

Bowel Control Problems

What are bowel control problems?

Bowel control problems refer to loss of normal control of the ***bowels*** that leads to leakage of solid or liquid stool (feces) or gas. These problems also are called fecal incontinence.

How common are bowel control problems in women?

Bowel control problems occur up to eight times more often in women than in men. The problem also is more common in older people or in women who have just given birth.

What is the most common cause of bowel control problems in women?

The most common cause of bowel control problems in women is childbirth. As the baby passes through the ***vagina***, the muscles or the nerves near the ***rectum*** may be stretched or torn.

Some women have short-term loss of bowel control right after childbirth. It likely will improve within a few days. In other cases, it does not occur until many years later. As a person ages, the ***sphincter muscles*** of the ***anus*** may weaken. A minor problem in a younger woman can become worse in later life.

What are some causes of bowel control problems?

Causes of bowel control problems include the following:

- Stools that are too loose (diarrhea)
- Stools that are too hard (constipation)
- Certain medications
- Certain illnesses such as ***diabetes***, ***multiple sclerosis***, or ***stroke*** (they can damage the nerves to the rectum and cause loss of feeling)
- Problems with the gastrointestinal system, such as ***inflammatory bowel disease***, ***irritable bowel syndrome***, ***colitis***, or cancer of the rectum
- Surgery or radiation therapy to the pelvic area
- Certain sexual practices, such as anal intercourse

What are some symptoms of bowel control problems?

A woman with a bowel control problem may have gas or leak liquid or solid stool. Other symptoms may include the following:

- A strong or urgent need to have a bowel movement
- Stool spotting on underwear or pads
- Diarrhea
- Constipation

What exams are done to help diagnose bowel control problems?

Your health care provider may examine your vagina, anus, and rectum. He or she will look for signs of problems, such as loss of normal nerve reflexes or muscle tone.

What tests are done to help find the cause of bowel control problems?

The following tests may be needed to help find the cause of bowel control problems:

- Use of a scope to see inside the rectum
- Anorectal manometry to test the strength of the anal muscles. A small sensing device is placed into the anus. The device records changes in pressure as you relax and tighten the anal muscles.
- Proctography tests to find out how much stool the rectum can hold and how well it holds and gets rid of the stool.
- A test to check if the nerves to the rectum and anus are working as they should
- ***Ultrasound*** pictures from inside the rectum to check the anal muscles

How are bowel control problems treated?

Your health care provider may suggest certain lifestyle changes to help you control your bowels. For instance, the problem may be treated by changes in your diet and simple home exercises to strengthen the anal muscles. Physical therapy, called biofeedback, may be helpful. In some cases, surgery is needed to correct the problem.

What muscle exercises can help treat some bowel control problems?

Your health care provider may suggest you do ***Kegel exercises***. Kegel exercises strengthen the muscles that surround the openings of the rectum, ***urethra***, and vagina. See the FAQ Urinary Incontinence for information on how to do these exercises.

Glossary

Anus: A hollow organ that connects the large intestine to the outside of the body.

Bowels: The small and large intestines, which are digestive organs.

Colitis: A disease that causes inflammation of the colon, the last part of the large intestine.

Diabetes: A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease: A term for several diseases that cause inflammation of the intestines.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome: A noninflammatory condition of the bowels that may cause cramping, diarrhea, or constipation.

Kegel Exercises: Pelvic muscle exercises that assist in bladder and bowel control.

Multiple Sclerosis: A disease of the nervous system that leads to loss of muscle control.

Rectum: The last part of the digestive tract.

Sphincter Muscles: Muscles that can close a bodily opening, such as the sphincter muscle of the anus.

Stroke: A sudden interruption of blood flow to all or part of the brain, caused by blockage or bursting of a blood vessel in the brain and often resulting in loss of consciousness and temporary or permanent paralysis.

Ultrasound: A test in which sound waves are used to examine internal structures. During pregnancy, it can be used to examine the fetus.

Urethra: A short, narrow tube that conveys urine from the bladder out of the body.

Vagina: A passageway surrounded by muscles leading from the uterus to the outside of the body, also known as the birth canal.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ139: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.