



Obstructed defaecation syndrome (ODS)

This leaflet gives information, advice and exercises about ODS – also called anismus, dyssynergic defaecation, pelvic floor dyssynergia or anorectal dysmotility. It means inappropriate tightening of or inability to relax the muscles in your back passage and pelvic floor, making it difficult to open your bowels and pass stools (poo). If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to your physiotherapist.

What is obstructed defaecation syndrome (ODS)?

During a normal bowel movement, all the muscles inside your pelvis, including the anal sphincter, must relax in order to allow passage of faeces or stool (poo) out of the body. Sometimes, these muscles fail to relax; or they can even squeeze (contract) instead of relaxing (called paradoxical contraction).

This can cause the following symptoms:

- Difficulty in opening your bowels. You could experience straining or the inability to pass stool.
- The feeling of not having “finished” on the toilet and not having completely emptied your bowels (called tenesmus).
- Feeling of blockage or obstruction in your back passage.
- Needing to use a finger to help get the stool out.

Which muscles are involved in a normal bowel movement?

When you open your bowels, both the pelvic floor muscles and the muscles of your back passage, called the external anal sphincter (the ring muscle just inside your bottom which you squeeze when you want to prevent passing wind), relax to allow stool to pass.

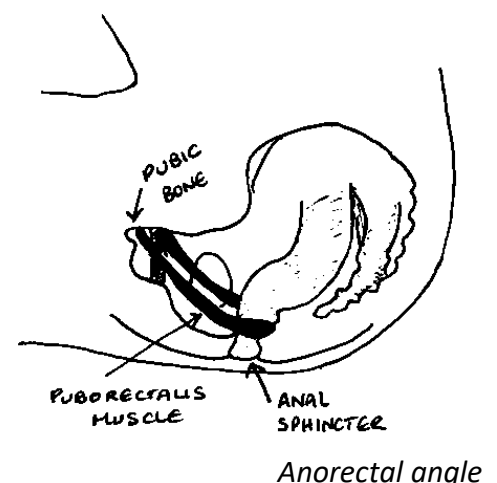
The pelvic floor muscles form a “hammock” which runs from your pubic bone at the front, to your coccyx (tail bone) at the back, and help to support your pelvic organs.

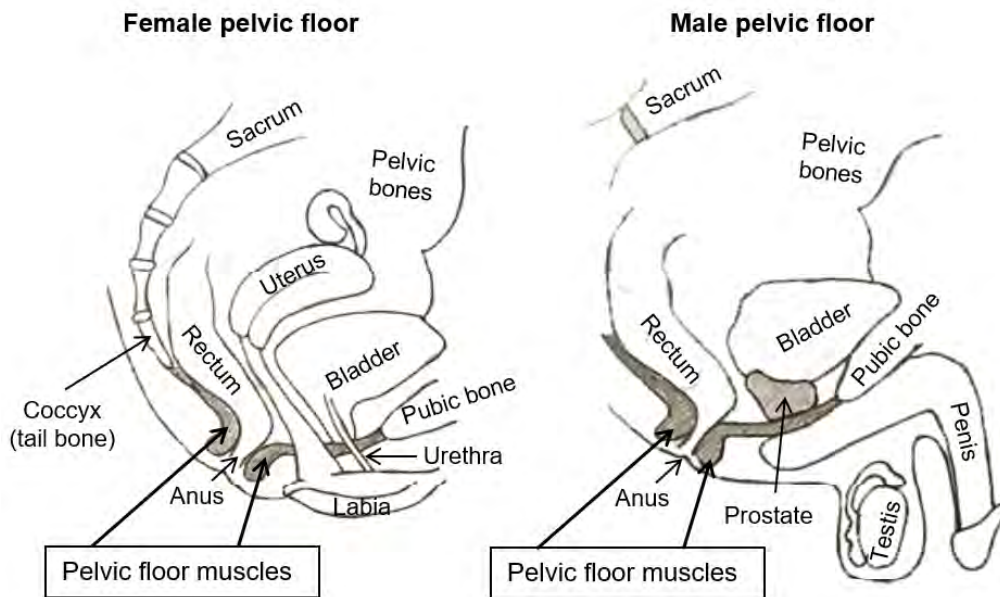
One of the pelvic floor muscles is called the puborectalis.

This forms a U-shaped sling around the back passage.

When it is tight and not relaxed it pulls the anal canal forward and creates a bend in it called the anorectal angle, making it harder to pass poo.

You cannot relax the puborectalis or the external anal sphincter muscles on their own; you will have to learn to relax the whole pelvic floor. This leaflet explains how to do that.





What can I do to help myself?

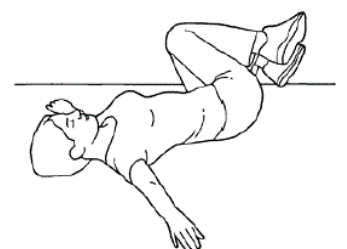
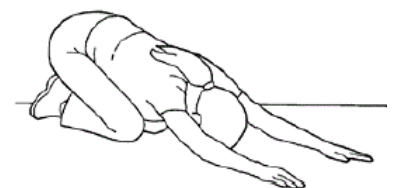
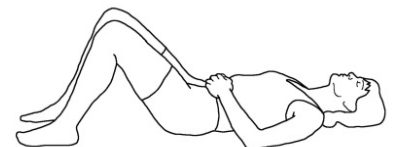
A general tip is to **eat a healthy diet** – high in fruit, vegetables and fibre, and drink plenty of water. This will help to keep your stool soft and easier to pass. Try adding in flaxseeds or linseeds into your diet – they can be sprinkled into yoghurts, over cereal or into salad. Many people find these very helpful in keeping their poo softer.

You can also try the following exercises:

Exercises

When not on the toilet:

- **Pelvic floor relaxation breathing technique:** lie down with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Breathe in fully, hold your breath and consciously relax your abdomen outwards and downwards. Then sigh the breath out, imagining your pelvis getting wider as you do so. Repeat 5 times.
- **Child's pose with open knees:** kneel down with wide knees (so that your tummy can drop in between your knees) and put your forehead on the ground and your arms above your head. Relax fully, feeling the stretch in your pelvic muscles. Remain in this position for five minutes if you can.
- **Side twist / thoracic expansion:** lie down on your side with your knees bent and arms stretched out in front of you. Then bring one arm over to the other side and roll onto your back, keeping your knees in the same position. Hold the stretch for two minutes, then roll over onto the opposite side and repeat on the opposite side.



- **Try perineal massage:** wash your hands and keep your nails short. Using a lotion or lubricant suitable for intimate areas, gently massage your perineum (the area between your scrotum and anus if you're a man, or your vagina and anus if you're a woman). This will help the muscles in that area to relax.



When sitting on the toilet:

- Keep your knees higher than your hips when sitting on the toilet, by putting a small footstool underneath your feet. This makes the anal canal straighter and therefore it's easier to open your bowels.
- Try the “wonder woman” pose: sit with your feet apart and hands on your hips. Push your tummy out until you feel it pushing against your fingertips. This will automatically relax your pelvic floor muscles.



Helpful websites

Bladder and Bowel UK <https://www.bbuk.org.uk/>

PGOP <https://pogp.csp.org.uk/>

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Jenni Churches (RBFT Specialist Physiotherapist, Pelvic Health and Maternity), June 2026

Next review due: June 2028