

Anal sphincter muscle strengthening exercises

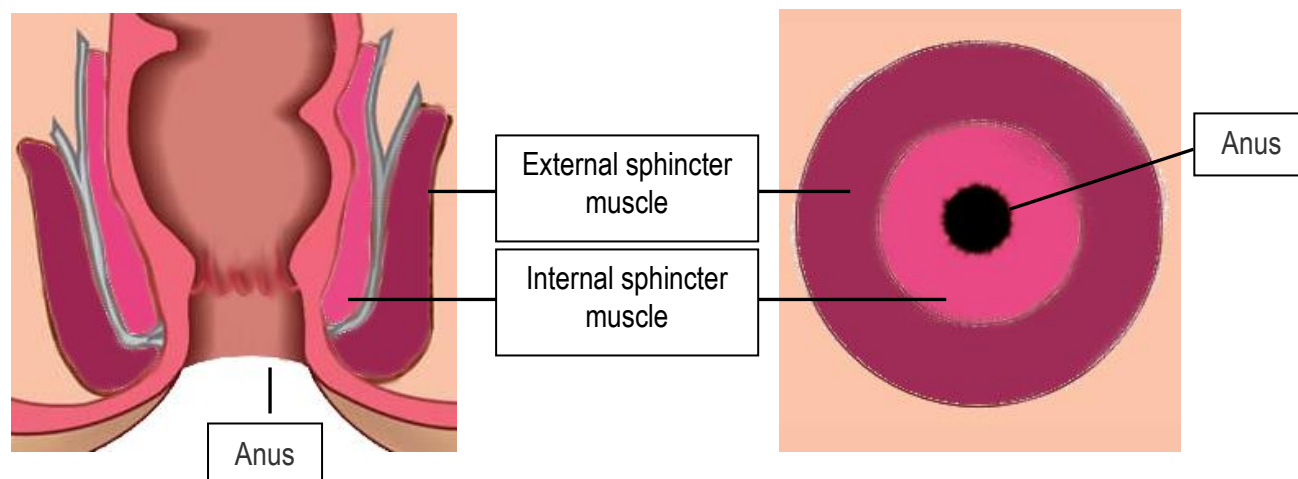
This leaflet is for people who are having problems with bowel control. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to your physiotherapist.

What are the anal sphincter muscles?

The back passage or anus has two rings of muscles (*see pictures below*):

1. **Internal anal sphincter muscles:** The inner ring of muscles. It works all the time to keep the stool (poo) in and relaxes when opening your bowels. You do not control it and it cannot be exercised.
2. **External anal sphincter muscles:** The outer ring of muscles. This is the voluntary muscle which you squeeze to control yourself when you have diarrhoea. This muscle can be exercised and strengthened.

Anal sphincter anatomy (cross section)



What do sphincter muscles do?

The sphincter muscles wrap around the anus. When stool enters the rectum, the internal sphincter muscles relax and allow the stool to enter the top part of anus.

Very sensitive nerves in the anal canal tell you if it is wind or stool waiting to come out.

If it is a stool, you squeeze the external anal sphincter muscles to stop it from coming out.

This squeeze pushes the stool into the rectum where it waits until you can get to the toilet.

If the external anal sphincter muscles are weak, people experience a sensation of urgency and can sometimes have bowel incontinence (leakage) if they cannot get to the toilet in time.

The weak muscle cannot squeeze hard enough to stop the stool from coming out.

How to strengthen the external anal sphincter muscles

External anal sphincter muscle exercises:

- **Step 1.** Lie down with your knees bent and apart or sit comfortably in a chair with feet apart.
- **Step 2.** Concentrate on where your anal sphincter muscles are positioned around the anus. Now try and squeeze the muscles around anus as if you are stopping yourself from passing wind. Try to squeeze and lift these muscles as hard as you can. It is important to breathe normally and not to hold on to the breath. Also make sure you are not tightening the buttock/tummy muscles.

Practice the following three types of exercise:

1. **Slow exercises:** Squeeze and tighten your anal sphincter muscles as tight as you can. Hold for as long as you can (up to 10 seconds). Then slowly release the muscle and rest for few seconds. Repeat as many as you can (up to 10 times).
2. **Fast exercises:** Squeeze and lift your sphincter muscles hard and as fast as you can. Slowly release. Repeat as much as you can (up to 10 times).
3. **Sub-maximal contractions:** Try and squeeze your sphincter muscles up to half of their maximum squeeze. Hold this as long as you can (20-30 seconds). Repeat 2-3 times.

How often to do the sphincter exercises in a day

Try and do the above three types of exercises 3-5 times a day. Your eventual aim is to be doing 10 long steady holds up to 10 seconds, 10 short and fast contractions and three sub-maximal contractions.

Try tightening the sphincter muscles when you have the feeling of urgency or if you are worried if there is going to be a leakage before getting to the toilet.

It takes 6-12 weeks to build up the strength in your muscles. Therefore, it is recommended to continue your anal sphincter strengthening exercise for three months in order to strengthen your muscles.

Helpful websites

<https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/patients/tears/tears-childbirth/>

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

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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Reviewed: June 2020

Review due: June 2022