

What You Should Know About Bowel Control

Many people experience the inability to control their bowels, also known as fecal incontinence. They may have trouble getting to the bathroom in time when they feel the urge to have a bowel movement, or there may be stool leaking unexpectedly, sometimes while passing gas.

Help is available for this distressing condition. Your health care provider can offer options to treat the problem. You may need a physical exam or medical tests, and possibly referral to a specialist.

What causes loss of bowel control?

Normally, after food is digested, solid waste is eliminated through the lower end of the large bowel, called the rectum. In the rectum, muscles and nerves work together to hold the stool, let you know when your rectum is full, and release the stool when you are ready.

Fecal incontinence can be related to constipation, which may cause the muscles of the rectum to stretch and weaken. Conversely, diarrhea also can cause the rectum to fill more quickly than it can stretch in order to hold the loose stools.

Muscle or nerve damage or weakness in the rectum may be another cause. This may be related to habitual straining with defecation, childbirth, hemorrhoid surgery, stroke, nerve disease, pelvic floor dysfunction, or spinal cord injury. Muscle or nerve damage may have occurred years ago, but as a person ages, the effects are greater due to muscle wasting or loss.

What are the treatments for bowel control?

Your clinician may ask you to keep a food diary. Sometimes a change in diet will improve bowel function. For instance, if fecal incontinence is related to constipation or diarrhea, adding fiber to improve stool consistency is one of the easiest ways to correct incontinence.

There are also medications that may help. Bowel training and pelvic floor exercises can strengthen muscles. Biofeedback, which uses a machine to let you know when you are squeezing the right muscles, is a tool your clinician may suggest.

In some cases, when these options have not worked or when bowel control is caused by injury, surgery may be recommended. The most common type of bowel surgery involves repairing muscle torn by childbirth or other injury. There are other types of surgery that address specific problems of individual patients.



Where can I get more information?

Coping with a bowel control problem may be embarrassing and cause social isolation. Talk to your health care provider to get help. Online resources are also available for facts, practical advice, and support:

- *National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse*: <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/index.htm>
- *International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders*: www.aboutincontinence.org

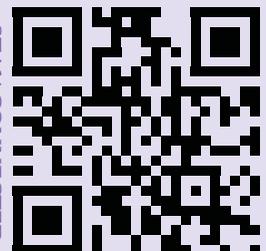
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