



ST. MICHAEL'S
HOSPITAL
Dún Laoghaire

Pelvic Floor Centre

Anal sphincter muscle control



Where are the anal sphincter muscles?

The internal and external anal sphincter muscles are two interconnected rings of muscles at the lower end of the rectum at the anal canal.

The internal anal sphincter muscle is primarily smooth muscle and is responsible for maintaining resting tone so that the anal canal is closed at rest. It is not under our voluntary control.

In preparation for passing a bowel motion, it relaxes and allows faeces to enter the top part of the anal canal.

The external anal sphincter muscle is a band of muscle that is under voluntary control i.e. we should be able to actively tighten the muscle to control gas and faeces.

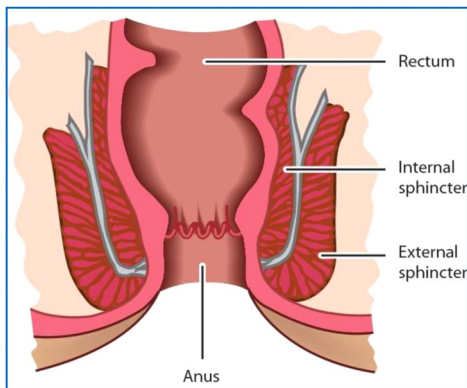
The external anal sphincter muscle must be strong enough to push the bowel motion back up into the rectum to hold until in an appropriate place to defaecate.

Exercising the external anal sphincter muscles can help to improve bowel control if done correctly and regularly.

These muscles require endurance and need to be able to both tighten to hold a bowel motion in and then release when it is appropriate to pass a bowel motion.

These muscles can be damaged due to child birth, pelvic trauma, or weakened due to menopause or over time, with chronic straining/ bracing.

Like any other muscle in the body, if we don't use it, we lose it!



Anal sphincter muscle exercises

Sit or lie with your knees hip width apart. Think of the circle of the sphincter muscle and try to tighten the circle inwards and upwards as if you were trying to stop yourself passing wind.

Do not let your buttocks, thighs, abdominals or even your shoulders move or lift. Keep breathing as you hold the muscle tight. Count how many seconds you can hold it for (aim for 10 seconds) and then release the muscle fully.

Repeat this 10 times, 3-4 times during your day.

Gradually increase how many seconds you can hold the muscle for.

It is also important to recruit the fast muscle fibres. Pull up the whole circle as tight as possible. Remember to not bring in your thighs or abdominals and do not hold your breath. Tighten and then release, repeating 10 times.

Aim to do the above exercises 4 times/day.

Pelvic floor muscles can take time to strengthen. It is important to do exercises regularly to build on muscle strength and endurance. It can take 3-4 months before you see results.

If you are uncertain about your exercises or how to do them, please consult a chartered physiotherapist specialised in bowel management.

It is possible to check if this muscle is working or not by:

1. Using your finger to feel the sphincter muscle lift.
2. Sitting on a rolled up face cloth or small towel.

If you feel a bowel motion coming, try to hold for a few seconds with your sphincter muscle and then go to the toilet when you are in control and not your bowels!

Testing procedures for the anal sphincter muscles

Endoanal ultrasound

This test looks at the integrity of the internal and external anal sphincter muscles using ultrasound imagery.

It involves inserting a small probe into the anal canal (back passage) and produces a set of pictures of the rings of sphincter muscles at various levels within the anal canal.

It can be completed in the Pelvic Floor Centre and takes approximately 15 minutes.

Manometry

Anal manometry looks at the resting and squeeze pressures of the anal sphincter complex.

A small tube is inserted into the anal canal (back passage) and pressures recorded relative to 'normal' pressures.

Defaecating Proctogram

Defaecating proctograms take place in St. Vincent's University Hospital and will be arranged for you by the Pelvic Floor Centre, if required.

This is a dynamic test to look at the functional control of passing a bowel movement.

Aspects of pelvic floor dysfunction that may be seen are pelvic organ prolapse, particularly a rectocele or enterocele, pelvic floor descent, incomplete emptying of the bowel or faecal soiling.

SVHG document control

St. Michael's Hospital,
George's Street Lower,
Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin,
A96 P902, Ireland.

T +353 1 280 6901
www.stmichaels.ie

 **ST. VINCENT'S
HEALTHCARE GROUP**
Advancing Healthcare Since 1834

