

HEMORRHOIDS

What is it?

A hemorrhoid is a dilated blood vessel, similar to a varicose vein, which is located around the rectum or anal canal. A hemorrhoid may cause no symptoms and require no treatment, but occasionally it may become swollen, itchy and painful. Hemorrhoids may also cause localized bleeding, seen as fresh blood on toilet paper or in the toilet. In more severe form, a small blood clot in the dilated vein can develop which is extremely uncomfortable.

What causes it?

There is likely a predisposition in some families for this kind of problem, but many people experience small problems with a hemorrhoid at some point in their lives. Straining to have a bowel movement or forcing out hard stool can cause a blood vessel to become swollen. Sitting for a long time on the toilet restricts blood flow to the area and can also contribute to the development of a hemorrhoid. Both sitting a long time on the toilet and straining at stool are often related to constipation, so this issue may need to be addressed. Pregnant women commonly have problems with hemorrhoids due to hormonal changes and the added weight and obstruction of the baby. During labor and delivery, intense pressure and straining often cause hemorrhoids which usually resolve without further problems. Significant diarrhea may also cause a hemorrhoid to develop.

How is it diagnosed?

From symptoms and examination alone, a clinician can usually diagnose hemorrhoids. Although external hemorrhoids can be easily seen, they may also be internal, or inside the anal canal where they cannot be seen without a small instrument. A clinician may also be able to differentiate a hemorrhoid from an anal fissure (tear) or another condition, such as a genital wart, but occasionally other diagnostic procedures may need to be done.

Treatment and Prevention

Most hemorrhoids resolve on their own, although the symptoms of pain or itching may need to be treated for patient comfort. Hemorrhoids should feel better and resolve more quickly if the patient takes Sitz baths for 10-15 minutes a few times a day. A Sitz bath involves purchasing a basin for this purpose at a pharmacy or just sitting in a bath tub with warm water. Avoid the use of bubble baths or other products in the water, as they can be irritating to this tender tissue. Stool softener products such as Colace make bowel movements softer and therefore easier to pass through sore and inflamed tissue. This type of medication is over the counter and package instructions for use should be followed.

The application of over the counter strength hydrocortisone cream or rectal suppositories for hemorrhoids can be used for a few days to improve pain and itching. Using moist

toilette cloths (like baby wipes) will be more comfortable than dry toilet paper to wipe up after a bowel movement.

Avoidance of constipation is both prevention and treatment, as ongoing straining and hard stools will aggravate this condition. Adding fluid and fiber to the diet can be helpful, but a fiber supplement (like bran or Metamucil) may be needed for the short term.

Complications

Sometimes a hemorrhoid may thrombose (or develop blood clotting inside), and this condition can be exquisitely painful. A thrombosed hemorrhoid may be lanced and drained by a medical provider which provides relief of pain. Ongoing or severe hemorrhoids may require referral to a specialist to consider surgical treatment. As with most medical conditions, surgery is considered a last option. Read more about **CONSTIPATION** for further information on prevention and treatment.