

# Sphincter exercises for people with bowel control problems

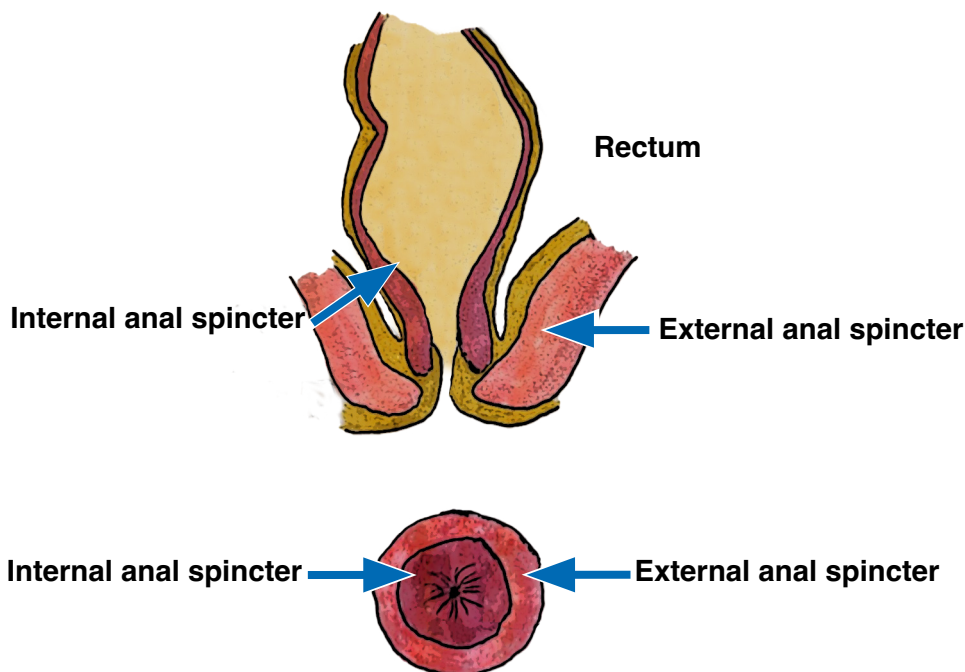
Physiotherapy Service [Patient information](#)

## Introduction

Sphincter exercises can help to improve your bowel control. When done properly, these exercises can build up and strengthen the muscles to help you hold onto flatus (wind) and stool (poo) in the back passage.

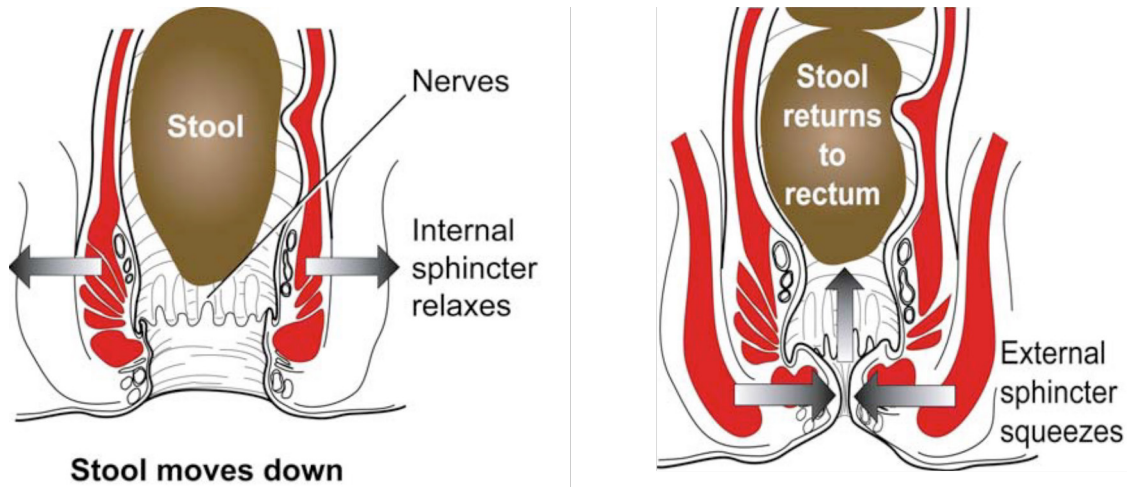
## Where are these muscles?

The back passage (anus) has two rings of muscle around it (see pictures below).



- The inner ring is the internal sphincter over which you have **no** control. This will always be closed except when you are about to open or are actually opening your bowels. This is normally automatic and you don't have to think about it.
- The outer ring is the external sphincter which is the muscle you **can** control. You can squeeze this muscle to close the back passage tightly if you have urgency or diarrhoea.

- Both these muscles wrap right around the anus. When a stool comes into the rectum, the inner muscle relaxes and lets the stool into the top part of the anus. Very sensitive nerves in the anus (which is usually about 3-4 cm long) can tell you if it's wind or stool waiting to come out. If it's inconvenient to release any wind or stool, you squeeze your outer muscle to stop it from coming straight out. This squeezing moves the stool back up into the rectum where it waits until you get to the toilet (see pictures below).



## What problems can occur?

Either or both of these sphincter muscles can become weak. This may be because of trauma, constipation and straining, general wear and tear, or childbirth in women. Sometimes, there is no obvious reason.

- If you have weak muscles and cannot squeeze enough to hang on, you will feel urgency and may leak wind, liquid or even solid stool.

## How can exercises help?

Exercises can strengthen the outer muscle so that it can once again give the support and control needed to stop or improve leakage of wind and stool. Like any other muscle in your body, the more you use and exercise it, the stronger the sphincter muscle will be.

## Learning to do the exercises

- It is important to learn to do the exercises in the right way, with the guidance of your physiotherapist, and to check from time to time that you are still doing them correctly.
- Ideally, sit comfortably with your back supported and your knees slightly apart. Try to keep your shoulders relaxed and your breathing steady.
- Imagine that you are trying to stop wind escaping from your back passage/bottom. Tightly squeeze the muscle around the back passage (not your buttocks, tummy or legs). Try squeezing and pulling that muscle up as tightly as you can as if you are really worried that you are about to leak. (You could also imagine you are picking up a solitary green pea with your back passage or holding onto a rolled up £50 note!). Be aware of your skin puckering tightly around the back passage and lifting up away from your chair. **Do this as tightly as you can**, with 100% effort.
- The second way to exercise these muscles is to try squeezing only slightly or with half the effort. You should be able to hold this for several seconds or more.

## Slow exercises to improve strength and power

Sit, stand or lie with your knees comfortably apart. Gradually tighten and pull up the muscles **as firmly as you can** and see how long you can hold for (up to 10 seconds). Rest for at least the same time as you squeeze. Make sure you're starting at the back as though you're stopping wind.

Write the time you can hold for here: .....

Repeat this tightening and resting until you can feel the muscles getting tired.

Write the number of slow holds you can do here: .....

## Firm and strong exercises to improve co-ordination and power

Squeeze the muscles up as **firmly, strongly and as quickly as you can (like a 'snatching' sensation)**. Then let go immediately. Repeat this until you feel the muscles getting tired.

Write the number of quick squeezes you can do here: .....

Repeat **both** of these exercises every day as often as you and the physiotherapist have agreed.

Write the number of repetitions to aim for each day here: .....

## Long 'half-holds' to improve endurance (staying power)

Tighten the muscles only slightly or with half of the effort and try to hold for longer than the slow exercises. Rest for at least 10 seconds.

Write the time you can hold for here: .....

Repeat this holding and resting until the muscles get tired and do this regularly throughout the day especially when standing, walking and other daily activities in an upright position.

## Tips/advice to help you

- Try to use each of these methods for practising the exercises frequently during the day (aim for 3 times for each method if possible) in a sitting, standing or lying position. Repeating it more often is also helpful but always stop and rest if the muscle gets tired.
- As the muscles get stronger, you will find you can gradually hold for longer each time. You will also be able to do more quick pull-ups before the muscle gets tired.
- It takes time for muscles to get stronger. You may need to do these exercises regularly for several months before the muscle reaches its best performance.
- To begin with, you may need to actually set time aside to concentrate properly on doing the exercises. As time goes by, you will find you can do them wherever you are, whatever you are doing.
- It is a good habit to link doing your exercises with something you do regularly during the day, for instance, waiting for a kettle to boil, talking on the phone, typing at the computer.
- If you are unsure that you are exercising the right muscle, try placing your finger over the back passage or, if you feel comfortable with doing this, slightly inside the anus (1-2 cm).

- You should feel a ‘puckering’ of the skin if you are over the back passage or a squeezing/tightening around your fingertip if you are just inside.
- Try to use your muscles during the day when you need them - tighten the sphincter muscle if you feel urgency and as if you may leak. Remember that your muscles will be able to hold on for longer if you squeeze more gently. This control will gradually improve.
- Watch your weight - extra weight puts extra strain on your muscles.
- Once you have regained control of your bowel, don’t forget your exercises. Continue to do them a few times each day to ensure the problem doesn’t come back.

## Contact details

**Therapy Services Poole: 0300 019 2121**

**Therapy Services Christchurch: 0300 019 4418**

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