

Haemorrhoids

Haemorrhoids, which are also known as “piles”, are swollen blood vessels that form in the anus and rectum. They are sometimes described as the varicose veins of the anus and rectum and are very common. Nearly half of us will be affected by haemorrhoids at some point during our lives.

The commonest cause is constipation. Excessive straining to open your bowels results in the normal veins becoming enlarged and forced downwards to become haemorrhoids. Other causes include pregnancy and childbirth. Sometimes haemorrhoids can run in families.

What are the symptoms of Haemorrhoids?

Quite a few people don't get any symptoms at all from their haemorrhoids. The most frequent symptoms caused by haemorrhoids are:

- Bleeding during bowel movements
- Protrusion during bowel movements
- Itching in the anal area
- Pain
- Sensitive lump(s) around the anus

Prolapsing haemorrhoids is the term used to describe the protrusion of the haemorrhoid which happens on bowel opening. Sometimes the haemorrhoid which prolapses can get stuck out and not go back. If this happens they can become very swollen and painful.

How are Haemorrhoids Investigated?

When you are seen in clinic the consultant will take a full history and carry out a clinical examination. Usually this will involve a rigid sigmoidoscopy and sometimes a proctoscopy as well.

If you are over the age of 40 and have had any bleeding or change in bowel habit the consultant may recommend endoscopic examination of the bowel either by flexible sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy to ensure that it is otherwise healthy, before treating any haemorrhoids.

How are Haemorrhoids Treated?

Most patients are advised to take a high fibre diet with plenty of fluids to avoid passing hard stools and needing to strain.

Mild haemorrhoidal symptoms sometimes respond to over the counter, non-prescription ointments and suppositories. Although they will not remove the haemorrhoid, they can relieve the discomfort.

Relief from uncomfortable haemorrhoids may also be obtained by sitting in warm water for a few minutes (sitz bath). When external haemorrhoids are very swollen and uncomfortable, the application of a cold compress such as ice wrapped in a towel can be helpful. Lying down with the legs up a little may help to reduce swelling.

Rubber Band Ligation works well for internal haemorrhoids which prolapse with bowel movements. A small band is placed around the haemorrhoid cutting off the blood supply and causing scarring which holds the haemorrhoid inside. The bands normally fall off within a few days. This procedure may cause some discomfort and may need to be repeated for full effect.

Injection sclerotherapy can be used to treat small, bleeding haemorrhoids which do not protrude. It is relatively painless and causes the haemorrhoid to shrivel up. The procedure may need to be repeated for full effect.

Stapled haemorrhoidectomy is a technique that involves using a special stapling device which cuts out a ring of haemorrhoidal tissue. It is most useful in dealing with extensive prolapsing haemorrhoids. This requires a general anaesthetic and is more painful than banding.

Haemorrhoidectomy is a surgical procedure which involves cutting off the haemorrhoidal tissue. This is a very effective treatment for large haemorrhoids which prolapse and are associated with significant external tags. This operation requires a general anaesthetic and may be associated with pain for several days afterwards.

Haemorrhoidal artery ligation operation or HALO is a technique that involves identifying the blood vessels feeding the haemorrhoid using ultrasound and suturing them off. Further sutures are used to repair the prolapsing element of the haemorrhoids. HALO is suitable for most prolapsing haemorrhoids or those that bleed. Most cases are carried out under a short general anaesthetic. Patients go home the same day, the procedure is relatively painless and most people can return to work just 24- 48 hours following the procedure.

To view a video clip of the procedure being performed, visit:

<http://www.channel4embarrassingillnesses.com/video/in-detail/in-detail-piles/>

Important note:

There is no link between haemorrhoids themselves and cancer; however the symptoms of haemorrhoids can be similar to the symptoms of bowel cancer. You should always seek advice from your doctor about any symptoms, particularly bleeding, to ensure that they are properly investigated and treated.

What are the next steps?

If you think you have this condition or any of the symptoms, you will need to seek medical advice.

If you have private medical care or wish to pay to see a consultant:

Take this factsheet along to your own GP and request a referral to one of our consultants.

For more information or to make an appointment:

Contact Birmingham Bowel Clinic on 0845 241 7762 or email enquiries@birminghambowelclinic.co.uk.