

Piles (haemorrhoids)

Ask your local community pharmacist for advice on treatments for piles

About piles

Piles are also known as haemorrhoids, and they are very common. Half the population will suffer with piles at some point in their lives. They are swollen blood vessels inside the rectum (internal haemorrhoids) or outside the anus (external haemorrhoids). Piles are usually not serious and generally not painful, unless their blood supply is interrupted, however they can be very uncomfortable.

The NHS in England spends approximately £1.7 million per year on treatments for piles that can be purchased over-the-counter from a community pharmacy. If 80% of this prescribing was reduced we could save over £1.3 million, which the NHS can invest in improving local healthcare services.

Symptoms

Most piles are mild and symptoms often disappear by themselves after a few days. Sometimes you don't have any symptoms at all, however the usual symptoms are:

- Bleeding after passing a stool (blood will be bright red).
- A lump(s) hanging down outside the anus, which may need to be pushed back in after passing a stool.
- A mucus discharge after passing a stool.
- Itching, soreness, redness and swelling around your anus.

Causes

The exact cause of piles is unclear, but is thought to be due to increased pressure on the blood vessels around the anus causing them to become enlarged and inflamed. The most likely cause of this increased pressure is straining due to constipation.

The following increase the likelihood of developing piles:

- Ageing (if you are over the age of 45)
- Being overweight or obese.
- Pregnancy
- Family history
- Persistent cough
- Repeated vomiting

- Constipation
- Prolonged diarrhoea
- Lifting heavy objects
- Sitting down or standing for long periods of time

What can I do to help?

Often symptoms will improve after a few days by themselves. If piles occur during pregnancy these will often get better after the baby is born. There are over-the-counter treatments available and lifestyle changes that will help reduce the pressure on the blood vessels of the anus. These can reduce the likelihood of getting piles or reduce the risk of them returning.

- **Increase fibre in your diet**

Improve constipation or reduce the risk of developing constipation by increasing the fibre content of your diet. Eat more fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, seeds, nuts and oats.

- **Drink plenty of fluids**

Reduce your intake of caffeine and alcohol and increase the amount of fluid you drink. In particular drink more water.

- **Go to the toilet when you need to:**

Empty your bowels when you feel the urge to go to the toilet as if not, stools can become dry and hard. This will make you strain and increases the pressure on the blood vessels. Try to avoid straining when using the toilet. If you have piles the use of moist toilet wipes instead of tissue will cause less discomfort and you should pat instead of wiping.

- **Some medications can cause constipation:**

Avoid medications that can cause constipation; for example pain relief which contains codeine (or dihydrocodeine, or similar medicines). However, paracetamol is safe to take and might help if you are in pain with your piles.

- **Lose weight**

If you are overweight or obese then losing weight will decrease the pressure on the blood vessels of the anus and reduce the chances of developing piles.

- **Increase your exercise levels**

This will help you lose weight, get fit, reduce blood pressure and reduce the chances of developing piles.

- **Non-pharmacological help**

If you have piles a warm bath can help to soothe them and a cold compress can help to shrink them. Try not to stand or sit for long periods of time.

- **Simple over-the-counter treatments**

Topical medications (creams, ointments and suppositories) are applied directly to the piles to ease symptoms, improve discomfort and itching. They contain a mixture of ingredients:

- Allantoin, zinc oxide or balsam of peru can help to soothe the discomfort of piles.
- Astringents such as witch hazel or bismuth subgallate help to relieve irritation and inflammation.
- Local anaesthetics, for example lidocaine or benzocaine alleviate pain, burning and itching, however they can make the skin more sensitive so should only be used for 5 to 7 days.
- Corticosteroids, for example hydrocortisone, will help reduce the swelling, inflammation and ease discomfort. They should only be used for 7 days at a time to avoid thinning and irritating the sensitive skin around your anus.
- Laxatives can make it easier to go to the toilet and reduces straining.

Your local community pharmacist will be able to give you advice on treating piles.

When should I see a GP?

- **If you have persistent piles.**
- **If you have severe symptoms.**
- **If you experience pain.**
- **Any rectal bleeding should be checked out by a GP to rule out more serious causes.**
- **If your stools appear black and tarry.**

If your piles are very severe a number of non-surgical treatment options are available on consultation with your doctor. Some patients will need surgery to treat their piles.

More information is available at:

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/haemorrhoids/Pages/What-is-it-page.aspx>

<http://www.patient.co.uk/health/piles-haemorrhoids#>