

Understanding Hemorrhoids and Anal Fissures

What are hemorrhoids?

Hemorrhoids (also called piles) are swollen blood vessels in the anus and rectum that become engorged from increased pressure, similar to what occurs in varicose veins in the legs.

Hemorrhoids can either be internal (inside the anus) or external (under the skin around the anus).

Hemorrhoids are the most common cause of minor rectal bleeding, and are typically not associated with pain. Bleeding from hemorrhoids is usually associated with bowel movements, or it may also stain the toilet paper with blood. The exact cause of bleeding from hemorrhoids is not known, but it often seems to be related to constipation, diarrhea, sitting or standing for long periods, obesity heavy lifting and pregnancy. Symptoms from hemorrhoids may run in some families. Hemorrhoids are also more common as we get older. Fortunately, this very common condition does not lead to cancer.

How are hemorrhoids treated?

There are a number of ways to reduce the size or eliminate internal hemorrhoids. Each method varies in its success rate, risks and recovery time. Your doctor will discuss these options with you. Rubber band ligation is the most common outpatient procedure for hemorrhoids in the United States. It involves placing rubber bands around the base of an internal hemorrhoid to cut off its blood supply. This causes the hemorrhoid to shrink, and in a few days both the hemorrhoid and the rubber band fall off during a bowel movement. Surgery to remove hemorrhoids may be required in severe cases or if symptoms persist despite rubber band ligation.

What are anal fissures?

Tears that occur in the lining of the anus are called anal fissures. This condition is most commonly caused by constipation and passing hard stools, although it may also result from diarrhea or inflammation in the anus. In addition to causing bleeding from the rectum, anal fissures may also cause a lot of pain during and immediately after bowel movements. Most fissures are treated successfully with simple remedies such as fiber supplements, stool softeners (if constipation is the cause) and warm baths. Your doctor may also prescribe a cream to soothe the inflamed area. Other options for fissures that do not heal with medication include treatment to relax the muscles around the anus (sphincters) or surgery.

How is minor rectal bleeding evaluated?

Your doctor may examine the anus visually to look for anal fissures, cancer, or external hemorrhoids, or the doctor may perform an internal examination with a gloved, lubricated finger to feel for abnormalities in the lower rectum and anal canal.

This information is abbreviated version of the website: <https://www.asge.org/home/for-patients/patient-information/understanding-minor-rectal-bleeding>