

Haemorrhoids

Commonly known as piles, haemorrhoids are varicose veins, which occur in or around the rectum. They are described as first, second or third degree haemorrhoids depending on their severity and as internal or external haemorrhoids depending on where they occur. Severe haemorrhoids may prolapse or protrude out of the anus when passing stools or when straining.

There are a number of possible causes of haemorrhoids, although in some people it may be due to a number of factors. People whose job means they have to sit down or stand up all day may be more prone than others, as may those whose work involves a lot of muscular straining. Diet is very important and constipation, due to lack of fibre in the diet, is a common factor in haemorrhoids. Other causes are being overweight and the stresses and strains put on the female body during pregnancy and labour.

While other medication may not actually cause haemorrhoids, some drugs may make the situation worse. Anticoagulants, aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, may make any rectal bleeding worse. Antacids containing aluminium salts and analgesics containing codeine may make constipation worse.

The common symptoms of haemorrhoids are usually itching, discomfort and sometimes pain, with a dull ache. Haemorrhoids may also bleed when the bowels are open. This is usually seen as traces of blood on toilet paper or actually on the surface of stools. Anyone who reports significant amounts of bleeding or blood that is dark, or mixed in with the stools, should be referred for further investigation.

Patients whose symptoms have lasted a long time, or who report a change in bowel habit, abdominal pain or distensions, weight loss, frequent vomiting or the passage of mucous with the stools should be referred to their GP.

OTC products usually contain a combination of a local anaesthetic, an antiseptic, and an astringent to contract the swelling. One product containing hydrocortisone is now available OTC. It is said to actually reduce inflammation, rather than anaesthetise the area. Laxatives, or advice on increasing fibre in the diet, can be given to relieve any underlying constipation and help prevent a recurrence. Antiseptic toilet tissues will help adherence to good toilet hygiene.