

Pruritus Ani

Introduction

Pruritus ani is a condition where you experience itchiness of the skin around your anus (back passage). It is also known as an itch bottom. Approximately 5% of the population are thought to experience itchy bottom. It is four times more common in men than in women. The condition can affect people of all ages, but it occurs most often in those between 40 and 70 years of age.

Aetiology (causes)

As itchy bottom is a symptom rather than a disease and can occur as a result of:

- skin infections caused by bacteria/fungus
- skin diseases such as eczema, psoriasis, contact dermatitis (where the skin becomes red, dry and flaky and this might happen in other parts of the body)
- haemorrhoids (piles) that contain enlarged and swollen blood vessels in and around the anus
- conditions of the rectum which result in mucous leakage and a wetness around the anus such as anal fistula, anal fissures or faecal incontinence (loss of control of your back passage due to weak muscles)
- Worms infestation especially in children

However it is not possible to find a cause of an itchy bottom in all patients.

Investigations

It is important to exclude any conditions that might cause an itchy bottom. This includes a good patient history and examination including a rectal examination including a proctoscopy or sigmoidoscopy.

You might need a referral to a Colorectal surgeon (bowel specialist) or a Dermatologist (skin specialist) to exclude conditions that might be causing you pruritus ani if your symptoms are severe and affecting your life style.

Important self care advice

1. Keep clean and dry. The best way to do this is to use water to gently clean your anus and the surrounding skin. Clean your bottom in this way after every bowel movement and before going to bed each night. You can use soap to clean your bottom, but make sure it's mild and unperfumed so it causes less irritation to your skin. Wash all of the soap away afterwards.
2. After washing, gently dry your bottom. Avoid rubbing the area vigorously, as this may irritate your skin. Instead, gently pat the skin dry using a soft towel. You can also dry your bottom using a hairdryer on a low heat setting.

3. When you're away from home, you can use damp toilet paper after passing stools, before gently patting your bottom dry.
4. If you have a tendency to sweat, or if your bottom becomes very moist, putting a cotton tissue in your underwear will help absorb the moisture around your anal area.
5. Consider
 - a. using soft toilet tissue
 - b. bath or shower daily
 - c. wearing loose-fitting cotton underwear and change it daily only put underwear on when your bottom is completely dry
 - d. use a light duvet at night so you don't get too hot
 - e. keeping your fingernails short to help your skin being damaged from scratching
 - f. wearing cotton gloves while sleeping so that you cause less damage to your skin if you scratch in your sleep
 - g. scratching a part of your bottom away from your anus so you feel better but do not damage the skin around your anus
6. Avoid
 - a. wearing tight clothing; women should wear stockings instead of tights
 - b. scented soaps, bubble bath, perfumes or powders around your anus
7. RESIST the urge to scratch your bottom, as scratching will only make the problem worse. Frequently scratching your bottom may damage or tear the delicate skin around your anus. This may result in inflammation (soreness) or ulceration (break down of the skin) and secondary infection.

Dietary advice

Some foods may make your itchy bottom worse. If the urge to scratch your bottom is greater after eating certain foods, try cutting them out of your diet completely or reducing the amount you eat.

Foods that may make your itchy bottom worse include:

- tomatoes, spicy foods, nuts
- citrus fruits, such as oranges
- chocolate and dairy products
- coffee and excessive amounts of milk, beer or wine

Treatments for pruritus ani

There are a few creams that can be applied to the skin around your back passage to help you feel better. However, you should be careful as some topical treatments



(those applied directly to your skin) may start to harm your skin if used for long periods.

1. Soothing cream/ ointments maybe be available from your GP or pharmacist. You will usually have to apply it in the morning and at night, as well as after each bowel movement.
2. Topical corticosteroids if applied will help relieve the inflammation and ease the urge to scratch. However they should not be used for more than two weeks.
3. Barrier cream/ paste/ powders are products that protect the skin around your anus and yet allow it to breathe. These can be safely used for longer periods to control your symptoms.
4. Antihistamines tablets are helpful if your sleep is disturbed due to itching at night. The medication works by counteracting the action of histamine (a chemical released during an allergic reaction) and also might have a sedating effect (they make you drowsy).

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