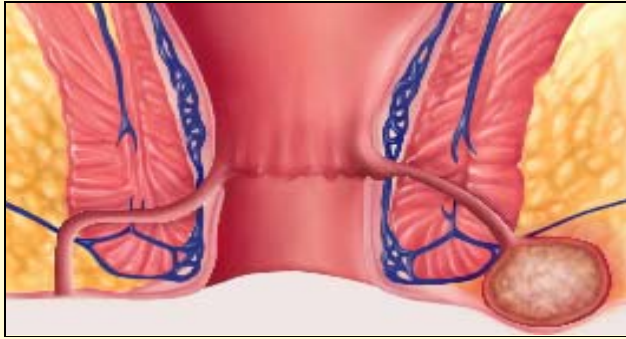


Patient Education Program

What You Should Know About Anal Fistulas



WHAT IS A FISTULA?

A fistula is a tract, a tunnel that begins inside the anal canal and burrows through the surrounding tissues out to the skin.

WHAT CAUSES A FISTULA?

Most fistulas are formed from an infection in the glands within the anal canal. As the infection spreads to the tissues outside the anus, an abscess forms. When this breaks open, or is drained, a fistula (tract) sometimes remains behind.

DO I NEED SURGERY?

If you decide not to have surgery, you may continue to have episodes of swelling and pain; followed by either spontaneous drainage and relief, and/or needing drainage in the doctor's office.

Over time, the infection can begin to spread in different directions. Putting off surgery can result in a more extensive operation later. There have been several reported cases of a fistula turning into cancer after decades of lying silent.

HOW IS A FISTULA REPAIRED?

There are several different approaches that can be taken to remove a fistula. Operative techniques include a simple fistulotomy, injection with a 'glue-like' substance, insertion of a 'plug', a mucosal advancement flap, and/or placement of a seton. The type of procedure chosen by your surgeon will depend upon the depth of the fistula, and the amount of muscle tissue involved. The most common method used is called a **fistulotomy**. The tract is opened up, allowing it to heal from the bottom-out.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE RECOVERY?

Although the wound can take months to heal completely, the discomfort usually subsides 1 or 3 weeks after the surgery. Following our post-operative wound care instructions will help minimize the pain.

Depending on the procedure chosen, and the type of work you do, you should be able to return to work within 4 weeks after the procedure.

CAN THERE BE ANY COMPLICATIONS?

The following complications include, but are not limited to:

(1) **Recurrence of the Fistula:**

The fistula can come back.

(2) **Some loss of control over gas or diarrhea:**

The most serious involves the loss of some control over flatus (gas) or diarrhea. This usually goes away as the wound fills in and heals. However, permanent loss of some control can occur, requiring a second surgery to repair the muscle.

(3) **Bleeding:**

Heavy bleeding after surgery can occur up to two weeks after the procedure. Should this happens, put pressure on the wound and come to the emergency room.

Return for exam in ____ weeks

- Re-evaluation
- Colonoscopy

- Flexible Sigmoidoscopy
- Follow-up only if symptoms persist

This fact sheet is for use by physicians only and is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. All specific medical questions or concerns should be presented to your own healthcare provider.