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Ymddiriedolaeth GIG Caerdydd a'r Fro

Resisting the urge

If you have had the horrible experience of a bowel accident in public you may understandably have become very sensitive to the feeling of anything arriving in your rectum. It is a natural reaction to try and prevent any further accidents by immediately finding a toilet. However, with time this can develop in to a bad habit of rushing to the nearest toilet as soon as there is the slightest feeling of something in your rectum.

You might find that your emotions have an influence on your bowels. If you are worried or anxious it may lead to more frequent, more urgent and looser bowel actions. We know that worry stimulates the bowels to work more often and with greater urgency. If you panic when your bowel is full, this can cause your sense of urgency to become even stronger – the more you panic the more you need to go.

It's easy to see how this can develop into a vicious circle; the more you worry the worse it gets, the worse it gets the more you worry. In the end it can almost become a self fulfilling prophecy – you do not make it to the toilet because you are convinced you cannot do so.

There is a tendency, in the attempt to hold on, to tense all your muscles and hold your breath. If you squeeze with your tummy muscles you will actually be raising the pressure in your abdomen and encouraging your bowel to empty rather than hold on. This will cause the stool to be forced down and out, rather than relaxing and breathing normally which would help you to hold it in.

INFORMATION SHEET

It is very difficult to concentrate on hanging on when you're rushing to the toilet. When the rectum fills, the internal sphincter opens; you need to be able to contract your external sphincter hard enough and for long enough to allow the internal sphincter to close off again, to prevent an accident. If you are rushing upstairs or trying to get your clothes out of the way, this makes it difficult to squeeze your external and anal sphincter effectively. Rather than rushing to the toilet there and then, you may be better to stand or sit still, breathe deeply and contract your anal sphincter long enough for the urge to wear off.

You may not be able to do this to start with. If the urge is too strong, start by trying to delay emptying your bowels once you are on the toilet. When you are sitting on the toilet with that desperate urge, see how long you can wait until you really have to let go. You may surprise yourself at how much control you really have, and if you are not able to hold on to it, it will not matter.

If you practice this technique and combine it with sphincter exercises and alterations to your diet, you should find eventually that it gets easier. The longer you can hang on the more fluid is absorbed from your stools and so the firmer and less urgent they become.

If you are having 2 or 3 bowel actions one after the other in the morning, you may be able to hang on to the first ones, and so just have one larger bowel action all at once. Also when you have some successes you become more confident, panic less and so things do not feel nearly so urgent. The less you panic the easier it is to make the urge go away

Practising “holding on”

Currently when you need to have your bowels open you find that you have to rush to the toilet. Your rectum, your sphincter muscles and your confidence need retraining to help you overcome this problem.

Next time you need to have your bowels open:

1. Sit on the toilet and try and hold on for 1 minute before opening your bowels. Don't forget to take a watch or clock with you! Gradually increase this time to 5 minutes. Don't worry if you're not able to do this for the first few times but keep practicing
2. When you have mastered this, repeat the above but hold on for 10 minutes before opening your bowels. It may be helpful to take something to read with you. This stage is harder but remember you are on the toilet and are therefore “safe”
3. Once you are able to delay opening your bowels for 10 minutes whilst sitting on the toilet, now is the time to begin to move away from the toilet. The next stage is when you want to open your bowels, to sit near the toilet, either on the edge of the bath or on a chair inside or just outside the toilet area. Now hold on for 5 minutes. Once you are able to do this, repeat the exercise increasing to 10 minutes.
4. When you are able to delay opening your bowels for 10 minutes whilst off the toilet, you should now gradually move further away. Maybe sitting on the bed in your bedroom. As your muscles are now becoming stronger you should be able to hold on for 10 minutes and as you feel more confident, increase the distance between you and the toilet.

Gradually you will find that you can increase the distance and time away from the toilet. This may take some time to master but the more you practice both your sphincter exercise and this programme, the sooner you are likely to succeed.

How to contact us

If you have any questions or need advice please contact us either by telephone or email.

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Useful contacts

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