

Hemorrhoids

Did You Know...

Hemorrhoids are one of the most common ailments known. Millions of Americans currently suffer from hemorrhoids. More than half the population will develop symptomatic hemorrhoids, usually after the age of 30.

The average person suffers in silence for a long time before seeking medical care.

It is common for pregnant women to have symptomatic hemorrhoids. They will often resolve following pregnancy; however, some women may have more chronic problems and should seek medical attention.

It is important to have all rectal bleeding evaluated by a physician as it may not be from hemorrhoids.

One half of people seeking treatment for hemorrhoids do not actually have hemorrhoids and may have another anorectal problem such as a fissure, skin tag, or simple anal irritation.

Office treatments for hemorrhoids are usually relatively painless. Only a small number of people with hemorrhoids need surgery.

What Are Hemorrhoids?

Often described as "varicose veins of the anus and rectum", hemorrhoids are enlarged, bulging blood vessels in and about the anus and lower rectum. There are two types of hemorrhoids: external and internal, which refer to their location.

External (outside) hemorrhoids develop near the anal opening and are covered by very sensitive skin. If a blood clot develops in one of them, a painful swelling may occur. The external hemorrhoid feels like a hard, sensitive lump. It bleeds only if it ruptures.

Internal (inside) hemorrhoids develop within the upper anal canal where it meets the rectum. They are usually painless and are covered by intestinal lining (mucosa). Painless bleeding and protrusion (prolapse) during bowel movements are the common symptoms. Some protrude with bowel movements and return to their inside location (reduce) without help, others need to be pushed back in, and some protrude all of the time. Rarely, however, an internal hemorrhoid can cause severe pain if it is completely prolapsed, cannot be reduced or pushed back inside, and develops clots (prolapse with thrombosis and incarceration).

What Causes Hemorrhoids?

An exact cause is unknown; however, the upright posture of humans alone forces a great deal of pressure on the rectal veins, which sometimes causes them to bulge. Other contributing factors include:

- Aging
- Chronic constipation or diarrhea
- Pregnancy
- Heredity
- Faulty bowel function due to overuse of laxatives or enemas; straining during bowel movements
- Spending long periods of time (e.g. reading) on the toilet

Whatever the cause, the tissues supporting the veins stretch. As a result, the veins dilate; their walls become thin and bleed. If the stretching and pressure continue, the weakened veins protrude.

Whatever the cause, the blood vessels enlarge and their walls thin, the supporting tissues stretch, and overlying intestinal lining or mucosa becomes loose. This bulging tissue, including dilated vessels and loose mucosa, is then called an internal hemorrhoid. If the stretching and pressure continue, the weakened tissues may protrude.

External hemorrhoids may also dilate, causing discomfort. Clotting of an external hemorrhoidal vessel is the most common complication seen. This results in a tender lump at the anal opening. This is usually due to pooling of blood resulting in a clot or thrombosis. It may occur after prolonged straining or sitting such as with constipation, travel, or childbirth.

What Are the Symptoms?

If you notice any of the following, you could have hemorrhoids:

- Bleeding during bowel movements
- Protrusion during bowel movements
- Itching in the anal area
- Pain
- Sensitive lumps

Do Hemorrhoids Lead to Cancer?

No. There is no relationship between hemorrhoids and cancer. However, the symptoms of hemorrhoids, particularly bleeding, are similar to those of colorectal cancer and other diseases of the digestive system. Therefore, it is important that all symptoms are investigated by a physician specially trained in treating diseases of the colon and rectum. Do not rely on over-the-counter medications or other self-treatments. See a colorectal

surgeon first so your symptoms can be properly evaluated and effective treatment prescribed.

How Are Hemorrhoids Treated?

Mild symptoms can often be relieved by increasing the amount of fiber and fluids in the diet. Good sources of dietary fiber include bran cereals, whole grain breads, fruits and vegetables. Eliminating excessive straining reduces the pressure on the hemorrhoids and helps prevent them from protruding. Warm tub baths for 10 to 15 minutes can also provide some relief.

External Hemorrhoids

A thrombosed or clotted external hemorrhoid is often very painful for the first 2 to 4 days. The pain usually begins to improve after this time and the lump will resolve in time. A small skin tag may result. Treatment depends on symptoms. If the pain is not bad or has improved, adding the measures noted above along with some mild pain medication is all that is needed. If the pain is severe or if the problem has persisted, then the hemorrhoid may be removed through a small incision. Performed under local anesthetic as an outpatient, this procedure generally provides prompt relief.

Internal Hemorrhoids

Treatment of internal hemorrhoids depends on symptoms and the extent of prolapse. The approach outlined above may be all that is needed for many patients. Larger hemorrhoids with persistent bleeding or prolapse are often easily treated with one of several office procedures.

Rubber band ligation - This method works effectively on internal hemorrhoids that protrude with bowel movements. A small rubber band is placed over the hemorrhoid, cutting off its blood supply. The hemorrhoid and the band fall off in a few days and the wound usually heals in a week or two. This procedure sometimes produces mild discomfort and bleeding.

Injection sclerotherapy and Infrared coagulation - These methods may also be used on bleeding hemorrhoids that do not protrude. Both methods are relatively painless and cause the hemorrhoid to shrivel up.

Hemorrhoidectomy - A surgical procedure to remove the hemorrhoids. This is the best method for the permanent relief of hemorrhoids. Internal hemorrhoids may be surgically removed when they are protruding and cannot be reduced, when they do not respond to office treatments or are too large for these treatments, or when they have prolapsed and clotted. A hemorrhoidectomy removes excessive tissue that causes the bleeding and protrusion. It may be performed under sedation with local anesthetic, under regional anesthetic, or under general anesthetic. It is usually an outpatient procedure, although under special circumstances hospitalization may be required. A period of inactivity and recovery is needed afterwards. The recurrence rate after a surgical hemorrhoidectomy is quite low. Laser hemorrhoidectomies do not offer any advantage over standard operative

techniques. They are also quite expensive, and contrary to popular belief, are no less painful.

Other treatments include cryotherapy, BICAP coagulation and direct current. Cryotherapy, popular 20 years ago, consists of freezing hemorrhoidal tissue. It is not recommended for hemorrhoids because it is often very painful. BICAP and direct current are methods that shrink the hemorrhoid. None of these treatments have gained widespread acceptance.

What is a Colorectal Surgeon?

Colon and rectal surgeons are experts in the surgical and non-surgical treatment of colon and rectal problems. They have completed advanced training in the treatment of colon and rectal problems in addition to full training in general surgery. Colon and rectal surgeons treat benign and malignant conditions, perform routine screening examinations and surgically treat problems when necessary.

The executive office of the 2,600 member American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons is located in the Chicago suburb of Arlington Heights. Board-certified colon and rectal surgeons complete a residency in general surgery, plus an additional year in colon and rectal surgery, and pass an intensive examination conducted by the American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery.