

Patient education: Hemorrhoids (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What are hemorrhoids? — Hemorrhoids are swollen veins in the rectum. They can cause itching and pain. Sometimes they can also make you bleed during a bowel movement.

In some cases, you can see or feel hemorrhoids around the outside of the rectum. In other cases, you cannot see them because they are hidden inside the rectum ([figure 1](#)).

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — You should see a doctor or nurse if you have any bleeding or if your bowel movements look like tar. Bleeding could be caused by something other than hemorrhoids, so you should have it checked out.

If you do have hemorrhoids, your doctor or nurse can suggest treatments. But there some steps you can try on you your own first.

What can I do to keep from getting more hemorrhoids? — The most important thing you can do is to keep from getting constipated. You should have a bowel movement at least a few times a week. When you have a bowel movement, you also should not have to push too much. Plus, your bowel movements should not be too hard.

Being constipated and having hard bowel movements can make hemorrhoids worse. Here are some steps you can take to avoid getting constipated or having hard stools:

- Eat lots of fruits and vegetables. They have fiber, which helps to increase bowel movements.
- Take fiber powders, wafers, or pills. You should get 20 to 35 grams of fiber a day.
- Take medicines called stool softeners such as [docusate](#) sodium (sample brand names: Colace, Dulcolax) or bulk forming laxatives. Bulk forming laxatives include [psyllium](#) seed (sample brand names: Metamucil, Konsyl), [methylcellulose](#) (sample brand name: Citrucel), [polycarbophil](#) (sample brand name: FiberCon), and wheat dextran (sample brand name: Benefiber). These medicines increase the number of bowel movements you have. They are safe to take and they can prevent problems later.

What can I do to reduce my symptoms? — Some people feel better if they soak their buttocks in 2 or 3 inches of warm water. You can do this up to 2 to 3 times a day for 10 to 15 minutes. Do not add soap, bubble bath, or anything to the water.

There are also medicines that you can get without a prescription ([table 1](#)). They are usually creams or ointments that you rub on your anus to relieve pain, itching, and swelling. Some hemorrhoid medicines come in a capsule (called a suppository) that you put inside your rectum. Others come in a cream that comes in a bottle with a nozzle that you put inside your rectum. It is OK to try these medicines. But do not use medicines that have [hydrocortisone](#) (a steroid medicine) for more than a week, unless your doctor or nurse approves.

What if the self-care steps do not work? — If you still have symptoms after trying the steps listed above, you might need treatments to destroy or remove the hemorrhoids.

One popular treatment is called "rubber band ligation." For this treatment, the doctor ties tiny rubber bands around the hemorrhoids. A few days later the hemorrhoids shrink and fall off. The doctor can also use lasers, heat, or chemicals to destroy hemorrhoids. But if none of these options works, there is always surgery to remove the hemorrhoids.

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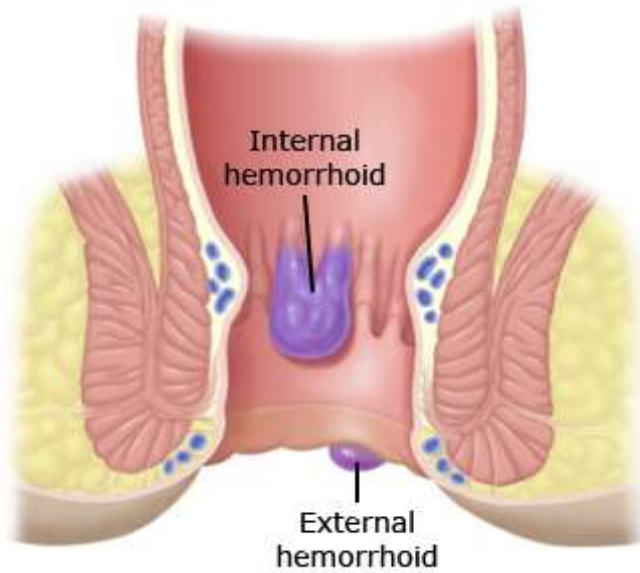
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GRAPHICS

Hemorrhoids



Hemorrhoids that are hidden inside the rectum are called "internal" hemorrhoids. You cannot see them, but they can cause symptoms. Hemorrhoids that you can see or feel are called "external" hemorrhoids.

Graphic 73076 Version 2.0

Common at-home treatments for hemorrhoids

Type of medicine	Examples	Notes
Stool softener	Docusate sodium (sample brand names: Colace, Docu, Stool Softener)	Softens bowel movements Helps avoid straining while sitting on toilet
Bulk-forming laxatives and fiber supplements	Methylcellulose (sample brand names: Citrucel, Soluble Fiber Therapy) Polycarbophil (sample brand names: FiberCon, Konsyl Fiber) Psyllium (sample brand names: Metamucil, Konsyl) Wheat dextrin (sample brand name: Benefiber)	Prevent hard dry stools which make hemorrhoids worse Might reduce bleeding and other hemorrhoid symptoms Needs to be taken with plenty of water (8 glasses of water a day) Your doctor might suggest starting with a small dose and then increasing over time
Pain relief	Pramoxine rectal foam, ointment, or wipes (sample brand names: Proctofoam, Pramox)	Can help with pain and itching Area must be gently cleaned and allowed to dry before using
Medicines to dry or protect skin	Witch hazel (sample brand names: Tucks, Preparation H pads, Preparation H wipes) Zinc oxide topical paste (sample brand names: Boudreaux's Butt Paste, Desitin)	May dry or tighten skin around the anus Zinc oxide also protects skin from irritation Area must be gently cleaned and allowed to dry before using Can apply after a sitz bath (soaking in warm, shallow water) Witch hazel wipes or unscented baby wipes can be used to clean the anus after a bowel movement
Steroid cream	Hydrocortisone rectal cream (sample brand name: Preparation H hydrocortisone)	Reduces swelling, and pain caused by hemorrhoids Do not use for longer than a week Do not use at all if you are pregnant unless your doctor or nurse tells you to
Medicines to shrink hemorrhoids	Phenylephrine ointment or suppository (sample brand names: Preparation H, Rectacaine)	Phenylephrine shrinks swollen hemorrhoids, and relieves itching and discomfort for a few hours Area must be gently cleaned and allowed to dry before applying
Numbing ointments	Benzocaine rectal ointment (sample brand name: Americaine) Dibucaine rectal ointment (sample brand name: Nupercainal) Lidocaine rectal cream (sample brand name: RectiCare)	Benzocaine, dibucaine, and lidocaine can help with pain and itching, but should not be used without talking to a doctor first. They should only be used once in a while, in small amounts.

- This table lists some examples of over-the-counter treatments for hemorrhoids. There are many more brand-name and generic versions available, too. Read all labels to make sure you're not using too much of one ingredient.
- Do not use over-the-counter treatments for more than one week without speaking to your doctor. They can damage your skin.
- Follow instructions carefully – for example, it's important to clean and dry your skin before using creams or ointments. You can use an unscented baby wipe to clean your anus after a bowel movement.
- If you have rectal bleeding, or if your bowel movements look like tar, see your doctor or nurse. These problems could be caused by something other than hemorrhoids. You should also see your doctor or nurse if your hemorrhoid

symptoms still bother you after you have tried taking care of them yourself.

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