

PRURITUS ANI

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS



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PRURITUS ANI

What is pruritus ani?

Itching around the anal area, called pruritus ani, is a common condition. An irresistible urge to scratch results.

What causes this to happen?

Several factors may be at fault. a common cause is excessive cleaning of the area. Moisture around the anus, from excessive sweating or from moist, sticky stools, is another possible cause. In some people, a loose and/or irritating stool may be caused by a high intake of liquids.

In addition, drinking certain beverages - especially beer - milk, citrus fruit juices and drinks containing caffeine, such as coffee, tea and cola, may be aggravating for some people. Similarly, some foods that may be a problem include chocolate, fruits, tomatoes, nuts and popcorn. Other rare causes of pruritus ani may include thread worms, psoriasis, eczema, dermatitis, haemorrhoids, anal fissure, anal infections and allergies.

Does pruritus ani result from a lack of cleanliness?

Cleanliness is occasionally a factor. However, the natural tendency once a person develops the itching is to wash the area vigorously and frequently with soap and a wash cloth. This almost always makes the problem worse by damaging the skin and washing away protective natural oils.

What can be done to make this itching go away?

A careful examination by your doctor may identify a definite cause for the itching. Your doctor may recommend treatment to eliminate the specific problem. Treatment of pruritus ani may include these four points.

1. Avoid further trauma to the affected area:

- When showering or bathing, do not use soap or antiseptics of any kind in the anal area.
- Do not scrub the anal area with anything - even toilet paper.
- For hygiene, use wet toilet paper, a moist cotton ball, baby wipes or a wet washcloth to blot the area clean. Avoid alcohol-containing towelette. Never rub.
- Try not to scratch the itchy area. Scratching produces more damage, which in turn makes the itch worse. Pinching the skin from outside the underwear will relieve the desire to scratch. The wearing of cotton gloves at night is sometimes needed. Soaking in a hot bath for 20 minutes can also provide relief.

2. Avoid moisture in the anal area:

- In the morning, at bedtime and after going to the toilet, place half a cotton ball into the anus to prevent mucous leakage. It may be lightly dusted with baby powder or Corn Starch Powder (from Johnson's Baby Powder Range). It is important to change the cotton ball during the day if there is moisture.
- Avoid all medicated, perfumed and deodorant powders including talcum powder which can irritate the skin.
- Dry well after washing but do not rub – pat dry only with soft but strong toilet paper. Avoid leaving particles of tissue paper behind. A hair dryer also works well.
- Avoid synthetic underwear, especially in hot weather. Loose cotton is best. Change underwear frequently.

3. Use only medications prescribed by your doctor and use only as directed

- Avoid creams and ointments. Many creams also contain local anaesthetics. These frequently cause allergy and are best avoided altogether.
- You might be prescribed a steroid (cortisone) cream. This can be helpful in the short term but use for more than 10 days can damage the skin, leading to worsening problems in the long term, and can also encourage fungal infection.
- Apply prescription medications sparingly to the skin around the anal area and avoid rubbing.
- Medications that contain local anaesthetics should be avoided as they can give rise to allergies, thereby making the problem worse.

4. Adjust fluid & diet

- In most cases, a maximum of six glasses of fluid daily is reasonable.
- You may be given medications to firm the bowel motions, especially if the motions are loose and frequent. However, excessive constipation should also be avoided, a regular once daily bowel motion being the aim. This can be achieved by the following
 - A bulking agent such as Fybogel (1 sachet twice daily).
 - Additional fruit (not oranges or citrus fruits), vegetables and bran every day
- Avoid foods that cause bowel irritation or are mucus producing. These include
 - Dark colas,
 - Spicy foods
 - Citrus fruits & juices
 - Coffee (regular or decaffeinated)
 - Beer
 - Nuts, popcorn,
 - Milk and foods known to cause wind & indigestion.
 - Ginger ale, 7-UP and other light coloured soft drinks are okay.
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How long does this treatment usually take?

Most people start to experience relief from itching within a week, but it may take several weeks to obtain complete relief. Remember, recurrences are common and to be expected. Don't become despondent over this; just be sure to reconsult your doctor so that appropriate corrections in treatment can be made.