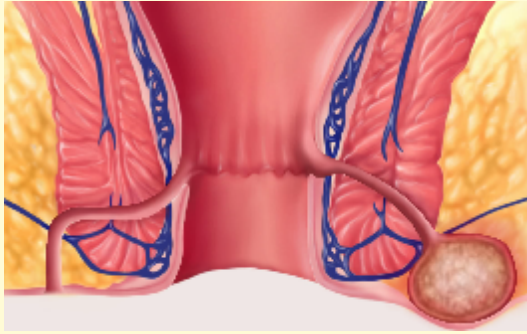


Patient Education Program

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 REMOVED?

There are several different approaches that can be taken to remove a fistula. The type of procedure chosen by your surgeons 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 pain usually subsides 2 or 3 weeks after the surgery. Nevertheless, pain can be minimized if post-operative instructions are followed properly.

Depending on the type of work you do, you may be able to return to work 2-4 weeks after the procedure.

CAN THERE BE ANY COMPLICATIONS?

Yes. The following complications can occur, but are not limited to:

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

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

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

The fistula can come back.

(3) **Bleeding:**

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