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What are hemorrhoids?

Hemorrhoids are enlarged blood vessels in and about the anus and lower rectum. They are one of the most common ailments known. More than half of the population will develop hemorrhoids but the average person suffers symptoms for a long period before deciding to seek medical care. There are two types of hemorrhoids: external and internal, which refer to their location.

External (outside) hemorrhoids develop outside the anus and are covered by very sensitive skin. These are usually unnoticeable, however, if a blood clot (thrombosis) develops in an external hemorrhoid, it becomes a painful and hard lump. At times, the external hemorrhoid may rupture and bleed.

Internal (inside) hemorrhoids develop within the anal canal beneath its lining. Painless bleeding is often the first symptom and is the earliest stage of hemorrhoids. As they enlarge, swelling and protrusion can occur during bowel movements. This indicates a moderate stage hemorrhoid. Advanced hemorrhoids are characterized by severe prolapse – protrusion through the anal opening that needs to be pushed back inside or that remains outside the anus at all times.

What causes hemorrhoids?

An exact cause is unknown but contributing factors include:

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

What are the symptoms?

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

- Bleeding during bowel movements
- Protrusion during bowel movements or while standing/walking
- Itching in the anal area
- Pain
- Sensitive lump(s)

What is the treatment?

Treatment of hemorrhoids depends on the type and the stage. Ask your physician which treatment is best for you.

Initial treatment

Mild symptoms can frequently be improved by increasing the amount of fiber (e.g., fruits, vegetables, breads and cereals) and fluids in the diet. Eliminating excessive straining reduces the pressure on hemorrhoids and helps prevent them from protruding. A sitz bath - sitting in plain warm water for about 10 minutes - can also provide some relief. Over-the-counter hemorrhoid ointments may provide temporary relief but should not be thought of as a permanent solution.

What is rubber band ligation?

- A small rubber band is placed over the internal hemorrhoid, cutting off a part of its blood supply. The hemorrhoid shrinks down and the portion of the hemorrhoid encircled by the band falls off in a few days (along with the band) during a bowel movement.
- This procedure is very effective for reducing bleeding and protrusion symptoms due to hemorrhoids. It is best for early and moderate stage hemorrhoids. This procedure may need to be repeated to fully resolve your symptoms.
- The side effects of rubber banding are minor and may include discomfort or a feeling of fullness in the rectum. You may notice some mildly increased bleeding, especially a few days after the banding when the band falls off. Only one rubber band is placed at each session to minimize any side effects.
- Take Tylenol as directed on the box for any discomfort you may feel after the banding. Avoid aspirin, naproxen, or ibuprofen as these can encourage bleeding.
- It is not necessary to change your diet or your activity after undergoing a rubber banding.
- If you have symptoms of fever, chills, difficulty urinating, or consistent and heavy bleeding, contact your physician immediately.

Will I need surgery?

- Surgery is reserved for advanced stage hemorrhoids or those that continue to be symptomatic after other forms of treatment
- *Hemorrhoidectomy* is surgery to remove the hemorrhoids. It completely excises the internal and external components of the hemorrhoid to cure the condition
- It is a very low risk procedure but does have pain associated with it
- It cannot be done in the office because it requires sedation, but it is an outpatient procedure