

James Aitken

MB, BS; LRCP, MRCS; MS; FRCS (Edin); FCS(SA); FRACS

General and Colorectal Surgeon

Unit 4,
77 Grand Boulevard,
Joondalup, 6027

Suite 23,
Hollywood Specialist Centre,
95 Monash Avenue,
Nedlands, 6009

Tel: 6389 0244

Fax: 6389 0255

All correspondence to Hollywood

ANAL FISSURE

This document is designed to provide general background information. It aims to supplement verbal discussion, to answer common questions and to be readily available as an *aide memoir*. It may not cover some areas that concern you. These can be dealt with individually.

You are free to ask about any aspect of your care. All questions will be answered fully, honestly and in as much detail as you wish. In the heat of the moment it is easy for questions that you intended to ask to slip from your mind. You should note on paper any questions that you may have.

What is an anal fissure?

An anal fissure is a tear in the lining of the anus, or in the skin around it. The usual cause of an anal fissure is the passage of a hard stool. The most common symptoms are sharp pain and bleeding when a stool is passed. Following the passage of the stool the sharp pain disappears, but a persistent ache may last for several hours. Sometimes the irritation results in the development of a 'sentinel' pile. This thickened skin may protrude from inside to outside the anus. It may itch and bleed from time to time.

When a hard stool passes the fissure it irritates the internal sphincter muscle underneath it. The muscle then goes into spasm. This means the anus does not relax when the next the hard stool is passed. This makes matters worse! Because of the pain patients avoid opening their bowels. This may make the stool harder, which irritates the tear further. This vicious cycle stops the fissure healing.

Treatment of anal fissures.

The treatment of anal fissures is aimed at breaking this vicious cycle. The initial treatment is non-surgical. Every effort should be made to soften the stools. This can be achieved by increasing the fibre in your diet and drinking at least 1.5 litres of water per day. In the short-term a stool softener, which can be purchased from a chemist, may be helpful. Options include Lactulose, Metamucil and other bulk laxatives. They all require a high fluid intake to work properly. You may also be prescribed Rectogesic, an ointment containing 0.2% Glyceryl Trinitrate. This ointment will help the sphincter muscle to relax. A pea-sized amount should be applied to the edge of the anus, and ideally slightly into the anus, two or three times a day and, if possible, about one hour before you open your bowels. About 20% of patients will develop a headache with this ointment. If that occurs, halve the quantity of ointment used. If you still get a headache you will have to abandon this treatment. Glyceryl Trinitrate will result in healing in 50-70% of anal fissures.

If the fissure does not heal with Glyceryl Trinitrate a small operation, called a lateral sphincterotomy, will be required. This operation, performed under general anaesthetic,

divides the lower most fibres of the internal anal sphincter. It is a small operation that is performed as a day-case. It results in healing in 98% of patients. Although the vast majority of patients have no long-term consequence there is, in theory, a small risk that minor incontinence may develop later in life.