

Managing Itching of the Anogenital Area

The basic aim of treatment is to keep the anal area clean, dry, and to avoid injury to the skin from excessive wiping or abrasion. Items in the diet that produce gas, indigestion or loose bowel should be avoided.

Foods associated with irritation of the bowels, producing mucus or aggravating drainage include tomatoes (including ketchup), citrus fruits and juices, coffee and tea (including “decaf” in excess of two cups a day), beer and alcoholic beverages, colas, nuts and popcorn, milk, chocolate, spices (especially peppers). Some people have anal itching only after certain foods (coffee, tea, cola, beer, chocolate, and tomatoes) beginning 24 to 48 hours after eating them and clearing up in a few days provided more isn’t eaten.

No matter what the cause, certain rules apply. Wear cotton (dermal) gloves during the night to prevent yourself from scratching. Antihistamine pills may be given for itch that disturbs sleep (both prescription and over the counter).

When showering or bathing avoid the use of perfumed soap. Especially avoid rubbing the bar on the anal area or rubbing the itching area with a washcloth.

Soap is highly alkaline and the residue collecting in the folds of the skin cause irritation and alter the normal acidity of the skin. Avoiding soap completely is preferable. Use Cetaphil lotion for the shower.

After bowel movements, wash the anal area with water or use wet cotton or tissue. Tucks Pads, hypoallergenic unscented baby wipes or absorbent cotton impregnated with Prax lotion can be used for cleaning. Do not leave a wet dressing against the anal skin for any protracted time. Pat the area dry with non-scented toilet paper and avoid rubbing with the toilet tissue.

If your itching is worse following bowel movements or if there is “after-drainage,” do a rectal irrigation using a 3 or 4 ounce bulb syringe and warm water. A European style bidet is appropriate for severe and chronic cases.

During the day wear a thin cotton strip drawn off the side of a roll of absorbent cotton (Red Cross Cotton/Johnson & Johnson). The cotton strip should be thin enough so that you are not conscious of its presence. Do not use a cotton ball. Change the cotton strip frequently. It is important to apply the cotton strip directly to the anus. A sanitary napkin is not a substitute. Wear cotton underwear.

Take a tub or Sitz bath morning and/or night in lukewarm water. Apply the prescribed lotion, cream or ointment as directed by your physician following a cleaning and drying routine.

This management program may be reduced or adjusted depending upon the control of your symptoms. The cotton strip should be the last measure abandoned and the first measure to be resumed in the control of your problem.

Recurrences are common and to be expected. Call your doctor if you are unable to control your itching or if the situation worsens in spite of these measures. A proctologist can sometimes help if this is due to some anal disease. Grenz ray treatments can also be used. They give several months of help but can only be repeated a certain number of times. Oral antibiotics or antifungal agents may help others.