

Building a Better Bowel Habit

Physiotherapy Patient Information

The bowel works best when it is in a routine. This routine will differ from person to person and there is a huge variation of 'normal' bowel habits, or how often you go – from 3 to 21 bowel movements per week.

Whatever your natural pattern, your bowels will respond well to regularity. The most natural time to open the bowels is about 20-30 minutes after a hot drink and something to eat first thing in the morning. In order to start building a better bowel habit, this is a great place to begin.

For those who work shifts, or simply can't devote 5-10mins at this time, choose a different time of day to start your own bowel routine.

The routine will be slightly different for everyone, talk this through with your Physiotherapist to develop the best routine for you.

Morning Bowel Routine

Bear in mind that the bowel takes time to respond, so be patient when starting this practice.

1. Have a hot drink, hot water is fine. Have something to eat. If you are not a breakfast person, just a piece of fruit will do.
2. 20-30 minutes later, even if you have no urge to go, sit on the toilet.
3. Optimise your position (see diagram)



A: Knees higher than hips



B: Lean forwards and put elbows on your knees



C: Bulge out your abdomen, straighten your spine.



D: Knees higher than hips. Lean forwards and put elbows on your knees. Bulge out your abdomen, straighten your spine.

4. Relax. Focus on letting go of any tension around your anus and pelvic floor. Inhale deeply as you bulge out your abdomen (see diagram above), exhale and gently bear down at the same time. Don't hold your breath. Some people find it helpful to hum, blow out through pursed lips or make an 'mmm' sound as they exhale. Inhale and repeat x 3-4. Relax and breathe normally. Repeat x 3.
5. After maximum 10 mins, whether or not you have had a bowel movement, get up and leave the bathroom. If you have not had a bowel movement, try this all again later in the day.

Extra Suggestions

After discussion with your Physiotherapist, you may decide to add some extra steps to your routine.

Perineal Splinting

This is a way of supporting your pelvic floor when you have a bowel movement. It is especially useful for anyone with a posterior prolapse, or a long history of straining to have a bowel movement.

Use a warm flannel or some toilet tissue and place on the perineum. The perineum is the area between the vagina and the anus in women and directly in front of the anus in men.

When you bear down to open your bowels, support the perineum at the same time, providing a physical support to the pelvic floor and making it easier to empty the bowel.

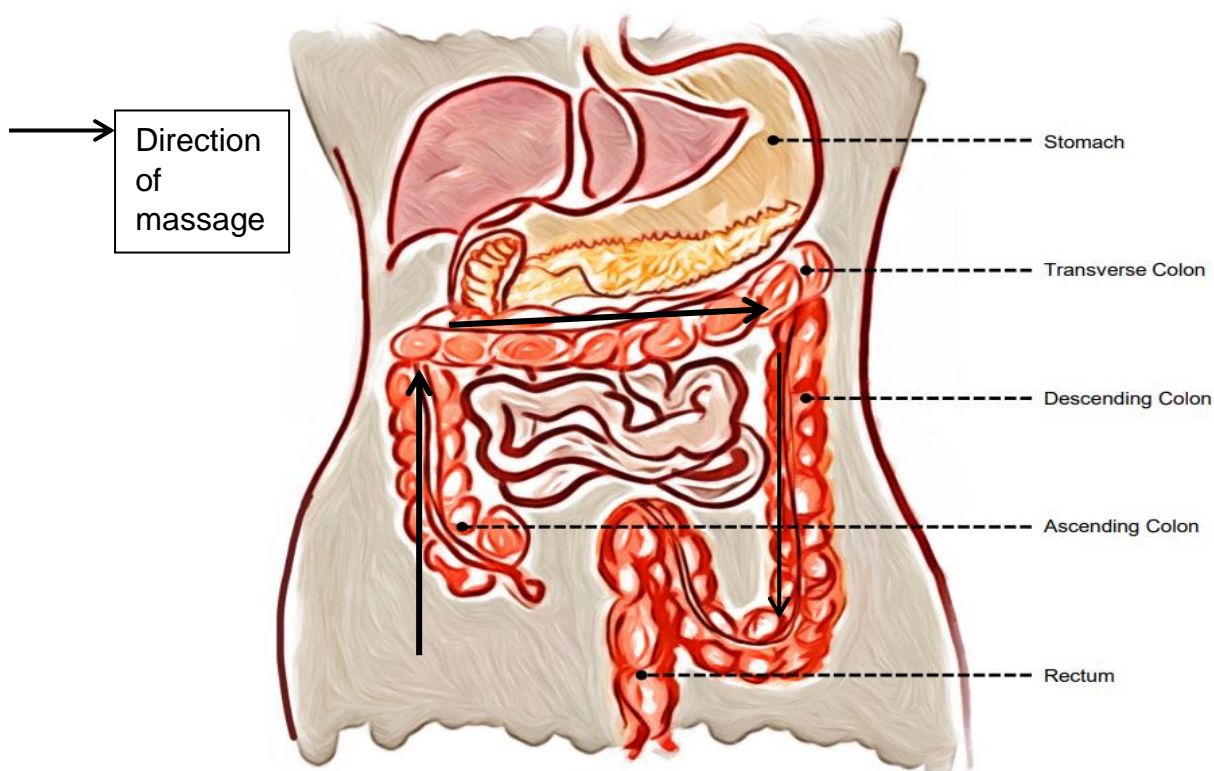
Abdominal Massage

Abdominal massage can help get things moving if you are struggling and can be done prior to your daily bowel routine.

There are various techniques you can use, here is one example:

Step 1. Apply pressure in a clockwise direction along the large intestine. Make a fist with your right hand and place it on the lower part of the ascending colon. You can add the other hand over the first for added pressure. Slide the hand up the abdomen towards the ribcage, then across the abdomen (along the transverse colon) and then down the left hand wall (the descending colon). This will assist in propelling faecal matter or wind along the gut. This should be a firm, deep pressure throughout. Continue for about 2 minutes.

Step 2. – Kneading. Start with your hand in a fist on upper left abdomen just below ribcage. You can add other hand over first for added pressure. Perform deep circular movements with wrist as you move across the transverse colon, then down the descending colon. Aim for 8-10 circles as you move down. Repeat from top to bottom about 10 times. Now repeat on the other side but starting in right lower groin, circling up the right side of the colon. Repeat from bottom to top about 10 times.





Suppositories

If you have already had a suppository prescribed to you, these can be added into your daily routine. Use your normal suppository after you have eaten/ drunk (step one in the morning routine), then complete the remaining steps.

The Happy Bowel

In addition to a good morning routine, consider the rest of your day. Your activity and stress levels have an impact on your bowel health, as does your diet.

- Walk briskly for at least 30 minutes each day, or any other exercise you enjoy
- Include some form of relaxation in each day e.g. yoga, mindfulness, breathing exercises
- Aim to go to bed at a regular time each night
- Avoid screen time just before bed

Sleep, relaxation and mindfulness

- **Sleep patterns** – Form good sleep habits to promote healthy bowel function. Aim for a regular time to go to bed in the evening and get up in the morning. Avoid screen time just before going to bed as this is linked with difficulty in getting to sleep. Prepare yourself and your space – for example; by keeping your room cool and dark, using lavender or a ‘sleepy time,’ herbal tea, to calm and prepare your mind and body for rest.
- **Mindfulness and relaxation** – Mindfulness and relaxation practices can help with digestive function and reduce harmful stress levels. Aim to incorporate some form of breathing or mindfulness practice into daily life. There are lots of examples and ideas on the *Mindfulness* section of the Pelvic Health webpage, or use your own. Any activity can be done in a mindful manner, including eating. Here are some examples:

Mindful eating

- ✓ Enjoy the food you choose to eat
- ✓ Eat more real foods and eat fewer processed foods
- ✓ Eat foods prepared in different ways – boil, steam, bake, roast and ferment
- ✓ Eat from a smaller plate to help control portion size
- ✓ Eat slowly. Try to eat one mouthful at time, finish one before preparing and enjoying the next mouthful
- ✓ Eat dinner more than 2 hours before sleep
- ✓ Eat fewer snacks, especially after dinner
- ✓ Plan your meals and prepare healthy snacks ahead of time, so you can reach into the fridge without resorting to a processed snack

Useful Tips

- ✓ Drink plenty of water – 1.5 to 2 litres daily
- ✓ Enjoy your food and drinks. Changing your habits takes time and determination. Focus on one sustainable change at a time until it becomes a habit. Consider applying the 80:20 rule to your eating and drinking habits. e.g. 80% of the time eat real foods and drink still water and 20% of the time enjoy treats if you wish
- ✓ Eat more greens.
- ✓ Eat more good fats. Eat good quality, unsaturated fats containing omega-3s e.g. fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, organic meats, avocado, olives, nuts and seeds
- ✓ Eat flaxseed. Help yourself form softer stools if this is an issue, by taking one to three tablespoons of flaxseed per day with yoghurt (ideally plain, full fat), or soak linseed overnight with porridge oats before cooking in the morning.



What to avoid

Avoid caffeinated, fizzy or sugary drinks. *E.g., Coca-Cola, fruit or orange juices, carbonated drinks, caffeinated coffee and teas. Even green tea contains some caffeine*

Avoid refined carbohydrates e.g. *white flours, pastas, white breads, crisps, cakes*

Please note, any dietary advice is general, please check with your GP or dietician regarding any significant changes in diet, or if you have an underlying condition, intolerance or allergy to any food. The British Dietetic Association produces lots of useful fact sheets that are available online. Have a look at:

<https://www.bda.uk.com/>



The Pelvic Floor

- ✓ **Exercise your PELVIC FLOOR and MOVE often.** Regularly practice your pelvic floor exercises (See the link to pelvic floor exercises in the *Pelvic Floor* section of the Pelvic Health webpage for help completing these). A Healthy pelvic floor is vital for good bladder and bowel function and support.

Please note that this is only a guide and an individual assessment and programme may be required.

If you have ongoing concerns and would like to be assessed by a physiotherapist, please ask your GP or health visitor for a referral.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to call Physiotherapy reception on (01225) 821241. They will be able to direct you to your Physiotherapist.

Alternatively, you can email ruh-tr.therapiesoutpatientadmin@nhs.net
To access video links and further support, please visit the Physiotherapy webpage: <https://ruh.nhs.uk/patients/services/physiotherapy/>



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Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email ruh-tr.pals@nhs.net or telephone 01225 825656 / 826319.