

# ***DR MATLEY & PARTNERS***

## ***Surgeons***

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### **ANAL IRRITATION**

These notes should help you understand how it happens and how to deal with it.

#### **What causes anal irritation?**

The most common cause of anal irritation is inappropriate anal hygiene by the patient. Many documents will blame seepage of faeces and moisture and anal hair. While these may contribute in some patients, they are not, in fact, the primary cause in the majority. Other conditions may contribute, but they are all rare. They include allergies, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, worms, eczema and psoriasis and fungal infections. Other causes include fleshy anal skin tags, anal fissure and prolapsing haemorrhoids, however the most common cause is assiduous, over-cleansing of the anus.

#### **What is the management?**

The doctor needs to take an extremely thorough history, especially about the exact details of how you clean your anus. The doctor needs to exclude the less common conditions mentioned above and he would probably need to examine the rectum and possibly the colon with a scope. Once the doctor is satisfied that there is no disease or predisposing abnormality causing your symptoms, then he needs to advise the patient how to treat themselves.

**“THE ANUS THRIVES ON NEGLECT”** This slightly amusing mantra is absolutely correct. Modern behaviour has resulted in over-zealous attempts to avoid infection in our society. This ranges from the extreme hygiene of food we buy, the decline in exposure to pets and other old fashioned sources of community acquired infections. In addition, cleansing after defaecation now includes wet wipes, extensive use of toilet paper, powders, ointments, etc. The occurrence of a “skid-mark” on underwear is considered disgusting and intolerable, while the “thong” is now extremely popular in females.

When one wipes with toilet paper, one is effectively wiping with wood. Think of a tissue on a “drippy” nose. Toilet and tissue paper are abrasive, and are often used forcefully causing micro-abrasions in the very delicate anal skin. These abrasions are instantly infected with the trillions of bacteria that exist in this area and cannot be washed away and sterilized. The anus is always populated by trillions of bacteria no matter how clean it is. The infected micro-abrasions, caused by over-zealous wipes, then begin to itch. This is identical to a cut on your forearm into which you were to rub your faeces. It would become an infected wound and it would come as no surprise to you that this wound was pussy, uncomfortable and itchy. While one can wash the forearm and keep it clean, one cannot achieve this with the anus. The bacteria are normal flora at the anus. One cannot avoid defaecation, so one cannot “rest” the anus, thus the contamination is inevitable.

Once the patient accepts this, they are on their way to solving their own problem. Wiping should cease, toilet paper should be avoided, and a damp cotton facecloth or a wet and soft sea-sponge, used to dab the anus until it is clean. A hand-held shower can also be used, or a bidet if you have one. Once the anus is generally clean (there is no need for it to be perfectly clean), then pat the anus dry with the dry part of the facecloth. A hairdryer can be used. The patient can also choose not to wear underwear and let the anus air-dry. No ointment, cream or powder should be applied. This will allow the natural conditioning oils

produced by the anus to get to work. These are the beautiful natural oils that the patient has been wiping away with their over assiduous anal hygiene. The patient should regard a skid-mark on their underwear as not inappropriate, and indeed acceptable. If they find it socially difficult, (“what will my domestic worker think?”) then they should buy black or navy blue underwear. Remember, primitive man whose anus was not problematic, used to wipe the anus with a leaf or some grass and did not care about skid-marks. He and his wife did not get pruritus ani!

### **OTHER TIPS**

**DO NOT SCRATCH**, rather pinch the skin firmly to control itching. Do not use antiseptics, TCP, soap and detergents. Wear loose underwear or loose over-clothes without underwear. Don't sleep in underwear. Don't shave the anus or use hair remover. Avoid synthetic underwear.

Some foods have been implicated. While there is no definite evidence for this in all patients, you may choose to try and avoid them. These include caffeinated drinks, alcohol, milk products, nuts, spices, citrus, grapes, tomato (histamine) and chocolate. Once the pruritus is resolved with all the measures above, a gradual reintroduction of their foods may allow patients to discover what they can really tolerate.