

PRURITUS ANI

What is pruritus ani ?

'Pruritus' means itching. Pruritus ani is itching around the anus. It is a symptom with many causes, but sometimes no obvious cause can be found. Pruritus ani is common and occurs more often in men than women. It is seldom due to an underlying serious condition and those who have pruritus ani are usually otherwise well.

What causes pruritus ani ?

The following are some of the more common causes:

- Distortion of the anal verge - Distortion of the anal verge due to skin tags, poor anal tone, haemorrhoids and more rarely tumours. Distortion of the anal verge can result in minor leakage of stool (soiling) The contents of the bowel can be mechanically and chemically irritant to the skin and can lead to pruritus ani.
- Skin diseases - Examples of this include psoriasis, eczema, thrush (a Candida yeast infection), and fungal infections.
- Threadworms - In children, itching around the back passage is often due to threadworms, which can cause pruritus ani in adults too. The itching is usually worse at night.
- Allergy - Pruritus ani may be due to an allergy to something in contact with the skin, for instance to fragrance in toilet paper, or to local anaesthetics or preservatives in creams used for piles.
- Skin damage - The skin of the bottom is sensitive and can easily be irritated by moist tissue wipes, soaps, perfumes and antiseptics These make the skin sore and itchy, and contribute to pruritus ani.

- Sweating - The skin around the back passage is often moist with sweat. If long periods pass without ventilation to the area, for instance if you sit down for a long time or wear tight underwear, the skin can be irritated further and become itchy.

What are the symptoms of pruritus ani ?

Itching is the main symptom, often occurring after the bowels have opened. Itching may be experienced during the night interfering with sleep. Patients may scratch themselves in their sleep. Sometimes the skin becomes sore and can crack or 'fissure' after scratching, making it uncomfortable to open your bowels.

What does pruritus ani look like?

The skin around the anus may look inflamed and thickened, and show scratch marks. Small fissures may occur and these may feel painful and sensitive, and bleed.

Determining the cause

Mr Jourdan will want to find out why you have pruritus ani. There may be clues in your history but he will also need to examine you to exclude skin conditions, threadworms, haemorrhoids and tumours. You will most likely need to have procto-sigmoidoscopy (a look into the anal canal and rectum with a scope). This may be done in the outpatient department or as part of a flexible sigmoidoscopy in the Day Unit (see info sheet on having a Flexible Sigmoidoscopy)

Treatments

As there are so many different causes of pruritus ani, there is no one treatment that can cure all cases. It is important to have a correct

diagnosis to ensure the right treatment can be implemented to relieve the symptom of itching.

Once any underlying condition has been treated or no obvious cause can be found then Mr Jourdan will usually suggest a variety of ways of helping to settle the itch:

- A short course of a steroid ointment or cream to be applied every day to the area to reduce the itching. This can then be used as and when needed should pruritus ani return.
- A course of antihistamine may be prescribed.
- The perianal skin should be kept clean and dry but soaps and detergents should be avoided. An emollient cream, such as aqueous cream, should be used instead of soap for washing the area to avoid the irritating effect of soap and detergents. Cotton wool balls with warm water are gentler than toilet paper and more effective in cleaning fissures and skin creases. It is important to ensure no little bits of toilet paper or cotton wool are left in the area as this will cause more irritation. The area also should be rinsed thoroughly after you have opened your bowels. Ideally showering with an aqueous cream after you have passed a motion avoids the need for toilet paper. Always dry the skin gently, without rubbing it.
- If you notice that a particular food makes the itching worse, avoid it.
- Scratch as little as possible, as scratching causes more damage and will make the itch worse. Wear socks on your hands at night if there is a risk of scratching in your sleep.
- Keep your stools soft and regular so you do not have to strain to open your bowels. Eat plenty of fruit, vegetables and other roughage, and drink plenty of water.
- Keep the area as well ventilated as possible. Underwear should be loose and made of cotton not synthetic materials. Avoid prolonged sitting. Avoid getting too hot in bed at night and avoid wearing underwear in bed.