

Blood in my stools! Do I have Piles?

TEXT DR QUAH HAK MIEN



Haemorrhoids, commonly known as piles, are actually present in everyone. Piles are blood vessel “cushions” located within the anus and the lower rectum. These “cushions” serve a function to provide control of continence; they act as an extra seal to keep the anal canal closed allowing us to pass motion without leaking stools. We notice them only when there is bleeding, pain, prolapse or discharge.

WHAT CAUSES PILES?

Long-term constipation and excessive straining during bowel movement are common causes of symptomatic piles. Pregnant ladies are also more prone to develop piles.

The elastic tissues supporting the normal piles gradually become stretched and torn. The piles enlarge and protrude; their walls get thinned out and bleed, causing discomfort and itch. At this stage, the piles are considered symptomatic piles or diseased. Symptomatic piles are common in Singapore, affecting about a third of the population.

OTHER CAUSES OF BLOOD IN THE STOOLS

- Colorectal cancer
- Anal fissure
- Anal fistula or abscess
- Anal wart
- Gastric bleeding
- Diverticular disease

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PILES?

The symptoms of piles can come and go, but can be any combination of the following:

- Bleeding with fresh red blood
- Itchiness and irritation
- Pain and discomfort
- A lump, which may be painful
- Staining of underwear with slime

PREVENTION

There are three simple steps to prevent piles.

- 1 Take enough fibre in your diet
- 2 Drink plenty of water
- 3 Avoid straining during bowel movements.

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WHEN SHOULD YOU SEE THE DOCTOR?

Rather than self-medicate, you should consult a doctor as soon as you have symptoms of piles. Bleeding may be caused by more serious conditions like colorectal cancer. Colorectal cancer is the most common cancer in Singapore. Your doctor may recommend a colonoscopy, performed by a specialist to check your large intestines internally before treatment of your piles.

HOW ARE PILES TREATED?

Piles are classified into 4 degrees of severity for the purpose of treatment.

★ **1st Degree Piles:** Internal piles, does not protrude from the anus and may bleed.

★ **2nd Degree Piles:** Protrude from the anus during bowel movement, but spontaneously retracts on its own.

★ **3rd Degree Piles:** Protrude with or without straining, stays protruded but can be pushed back into the anus.

★ **4th Degree Piles:** Protrude from the anus and remain permanently outside the anus. Cannot be pushed back at all.

Early symptomatic piles (1st and 2nd degrees) can usually be treated without the need for surgery. Increasing the intake of vegetables and fruits containing high fibre content will improve constipation for most persons and avoid the need for too much straining during bowel movement. Taking sufficient water as well as wholemeal bread or cereals will help too.


Mild internal piles may be treated with medication. Rubber banding of piles is an effective treatment for early stage piles. It does not require anaesthesia and causes minimal discomfort. It can be done in the specialist’s clinic itself.

SURGERY FOR PILES

Surgery is considered for the treatment of symptomatic large external piles (3rd and 4th degrees) that will not improve on medical treatment alone. The surgery for piles is performed under anaesthesia as day-surgery. Your doctor will advise you on which is the most appropriate method of treatment for your severity of piles.

Conventional operation for piles involves removal by cutting them away using a hot electrocautery knife.

Another technique uses a specialised circular stapler to remove the diseased piles. It is called “stapled haemorrhoidectomy”. The device removes the piles and seals the wound with a row of tiny staples. Patients find that their wounds heal within 2 weeks and few complain of severe pain.

“THD” or transanal haemorrhoidal dearterialisation is a new surgical treatment of piles. It uses an ultrasound guide to direct precise suturing of the haemorrhoidal vessels. This results in reduced blood flow and relieves the congestion of the piles. There is minimal pain with this technique of surgery because there is no cutting involved. 

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT PILES:

1. PILES CAN BE CAUSED BY SITTING ON WARM SURFACES

This is a popular myth especially among the Chinese, but there is no truth to it. Taking over a warm seat after someone had vacated it will not cause piles.

2. PILES CAN BE CAUSED BY EATING CHILLI

Again, this is not the case. It is true that some spicy food may cause rectal irritation and itching. These symptoms, however, should not be confused with piles.

3. PILES CAN TURN CANCEROUS

Both colorectal cancer and piles have similar symptoms of bleeding, causing this confusion. But piles do not turn cancerous.

4. PILES SURGERY IS VERY PAINFUL

Today’s treatment methods for piles are much less painful and the recovery is faster. In fact, most early stage piles can be treated successfully without surgery!



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Dr Quah Hak Mien is a specialist surgeon at **Gleneagles Medical Centre**. His clinical interest is in the treatment of colorectal diseases. His scope of work includes managing a wide range of conditions including colorectal cancer, diverticular disease, inflammatory bowel disease, perianal diseases like piles, anal fistula and anal fissure. He also has clinical expertise in functional bowel disorders like irritable bowel syndrome, constipation and faecal incontinence.

