

By Dr Quah Hak Mien

## What is Bowel Incontinence?

Bowel incontinence is the difficulty or inability to control flatus or stool, leading to an involuntary passage of stools. Incontinence is a common problem in the population, though it's not often talked about because of the embarrassing nature of the condition. Incontinence symptoms are often kept hidden by patients, thus left untreated. Bowel incontinence symptoms may vary from mild to severe, from occasionally leaking a small amount of stool and passing gas to completely losing control of bowel movements. Patients may have difficulty in the control of flatus, liquid or solid stools. In some cases, just the worry that a bowel accident may happen can severely affect the patient's quality of life and limit his or her ability to interact socially due to fear and embarrassment.

# Losing Control?

## Causes of Bowel Incontinence

There are many possible causes of bowel incontinence. Childbirth injury is one of the most common causes for women. Childbirth injuries may result in a tear in the anal muscles; in some cases, the nerves controlling the anal muscles may be stretched or injured. Most injuries are recognised immediately and treated straight after childbirth. Some cases may go unnoticed and become a problem later in life; in such situations, a previous childbirth may not be the cause of bowel incontinence.

Anal muscle or nerve injury as a result of anal surgery or traumatic accidents may also cause bowel incontinence. Some people experience loss of strength and tone in the anal muscles as they age; as a consequence, a minor control problem at a younger age may become more pronounced later in life. Severe watery diarrhoea may also overwhelm the ability to control the passage of stool. In some cases, medical illnesses and medications play a role in problems with control.

If bleeding accompanies the loss of bowel control, please consult your doctor early. These symptoms may mean inflammation of the colon (colitis) or rectal cancer, severe conditions that require immediate evaluation by a doctor.

## Types of Treatment

A detailed medical evaluation and physical examination are necessary to determine the cause and severity of bowel incontinence.

Mild incontinence can be treated with dietary changes and medications. Bowel diseases which cause diarrhoea may contribute to anal control problems; if treated well it may improve symptoms of incontinence. Pelvic floor physiotherapy exercises can improve the pelvic floor muscle tone and strength. These exercises may be performed at home for mild cases.

Patients who have bowel incontinence that continues even with medical treatment may benefit from surgery to correct the problem. Surgery may include repair and tightening of the pelvic floor and anal muscles. Recently, implantation of electrodes with pacemaker in the form of sacral nerve neuromodulation to improve bowel control is made available. This technique delivers electrical energy to the muscles surrounding the anus which results in improvement in muscle tone and bowel function.

Incontinence is not a hopeless situation. Proper treatment is available and can help most people eliminate their bowel-control problem.



**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.



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