

# DITCH THE ITCH

If you suffer from haemorrhoids, you're not alone. And you're also in the company of some quite famous people: one historical argument suggests that the Battle of Waterloo was lost because Napoleon Bonaparte couldn't sit on his horse and lead his army into the fray on account of haemorrhoid trouble. Pregnant women are particularly susceptible to the condition. Here we speak with DR QUAH HAK MIEN about mothers-to-be and haemorrhoids, and, well, how to put them behind you.

## What are haemorrhoids?

Haemorrhoids, commonly known as piles, are actually present normally in all people. Piles are blood vessel "cushions" located within the anus and the lower rectum. These cushions serve the function of providing control of continence, allowing us to pass motion without leaking stools.

## How common are they in pregnant women?

Very common. Many pregnant women develop constipation; and constipation and straining at stools will aggravate haemorrhoids. Haemorrhoids can also occur because hormones make pregnant women's veins relax and swell.

## Do they usually appear at a particular stage in a pregnancy?

Yes, they tend to get worse during the second and third trimester or during labour.

## Can you list some of the ways I might avoid getting them if I'm pregnant?

Eat plenty of foods containing high fibre, such as wholegrain bread and cereal, vegetables and fruit. Drink plenty of water. This will prevent constipation and the need to strain. Also, do regular exercise.

## How much discomfort can haemorrhoids cause?

They may itch, ache or feel sore. You may also feel lumps of piles around your anus. They make going to the bathroom uncomfortable and painful. Haemorrhoids may bleed too, or produce mucus discharge. Occasionally, they may create the feeling of the need to pass stools despite having just emptied your bowels. This makes you strain harder and further worsens your haemorrhoids.

## What are some of the methods I can use at home to get relief?

If the haemorrhoids prolapse, push them back inside gently using some lubricating gel. Wash the anal area with water or moist tissue instead of wiping with dry toilet paper.

## When should I call my practitioner?


You should discuss possible constipation and haemorrhoids with your gynae or family physician in the early stages of your pregnancy. Prevention is better than cure, so seek their advice early. The initial stage of haemorrhoids is very easily treated, so you can have a more pleasant pregnancy experience without the discomfort they cause.



## What medical treatment might a doctor administer?

Your gynae or family doctor may prescribe a stool softener or laxative to treat the constipation. Creams or suppositories may also be helpful. Some of these medications may be available over the counter at pharmacies; but don't use a cream or medication without checking with your doctor or pharmacist first, particularly if you are pregnant. If your haemorrhoids are severe, your doctor may refer you to a colorectal surgeon.

## Is surgery sometimes required? What's the nature of the surgery?

Surgery is rarely required for severe haemorrhoids during pregnancy, unless they become extremely painful or badly infected. Although nowadays anaesthesia and surgery are safe during pregnancy, I prefer to treat haemorrhoids with medication first. This is because haemorrhoids usually improve within weeks after childbirth. For those women who have unresolved haemorrhoids after delivery, surgery can be performed. 

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