



A patient's guide to fistulas

Causes, symptoms & treatments

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Fistulas

A fistula is a small tunnel that forms between one surface in the body and another surface.

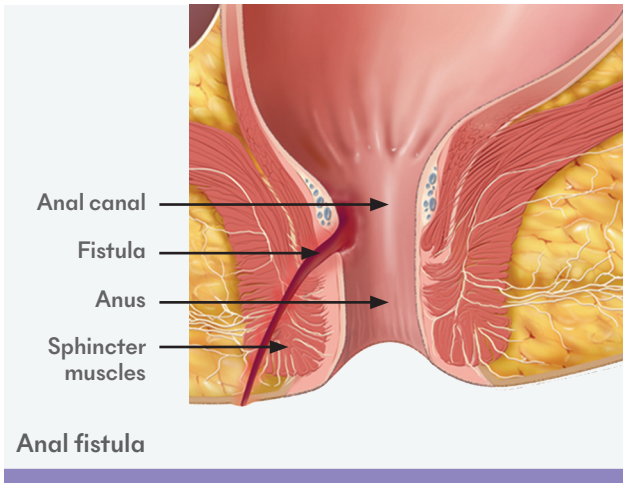
This guide contains information about anal fistulas and rectovaginal fistulas.

Fistulas can be painful and unpleasant. If you or someone you know has a fistula, we hope this guide will answer your questions and provide helpful information.

Anal fistulas

What is an anal fistula?

An anal **fistula** is a small tunnel that goes from the **anal canal** to the skin on the outside of the body.



What causes an anal fistula?

An anal **fistula** is usually caused by an anal **abscess**. An anal abscess is a pus-filled gap in the tissues of the **anal canal**. When an abscess bursts open, the pus or fluid drains from it, and a fistula can form. Then the fistula remains open, even after the abscess has healed.

Anal **abscesses** don't always lead to anal **fistulas**. A fistula forms in only about half of all anal abscess cases.¹ Certain conditions such as diverticulitis and Crohn's disease may also put you at risk for an anal fistula.² Sexually transmitted infections and cancer may also increase your risk of developing a fistula.³

What are the signs and symptoms of an anal fistula?

The signs and symptoms of an anal **fistula** can include:

- Chills
- Fever
- Itching around the anus
- Pain
- Pus and fluid drainage
- Swelling
- Tiredness
- Weakness

How is an anal fistula diagnosed?

A doctor may be able to diagnose a fistula by looking at the area around the anus. If the doctor can't see any signs of a fistula around the anus, then he or she will have to look inside the anal canal and rectum to make a diagnosis.

Doctors use a tube called an **anoscope** to look inside the anal canal and rectum to check for swelling or an **abscess**. These signs could indicate an anal fistula.

Anal fistula treatments

An anal **fistula** will not heal on its own. Antibiotics might help, but most anal fistulas need another form of treatment. Some treatments involve cutting the anal **sphincter muscles**, which may cause **fecal incontinence**.⁴ Talk to your surgeon to learn more about your treatment options.

Fistulotomy

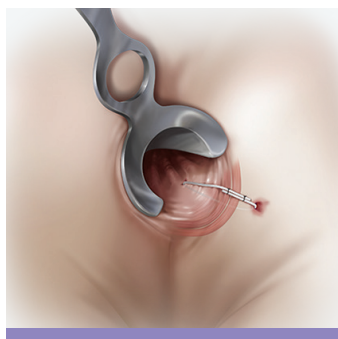
The most common treatment for an anal **fistula** is a surgical procedure called a fistulotomy. This procedure works well for fistulas that are close to the skin.

In a **fistulotomy**, the doctor cuts the fistula in order to open it up to the **anal canal**. Then the fistula can heal from the inside out. If the fistula is very small, then the doctor might give you a numbing drug and perform the surgery in a doctor's office. If you have a larger fistula, you may need to have surgery in a hospital or surgery center. Surgery for larger fistulas usually requires numbing drugs. You may have mild discomfort or pain after this surgery. You may need several weeks to heal.⁵



Cutting seton

A doctor may use a cutting **seton** to treat deep **fistulas**. The doctor threads the seton through the fistula tract and out the anus. Then the seton is slowly tightened over a period of weeks. Like a **fistulotomy**, a cutting seton can allow your fistula to heal from the inside out.



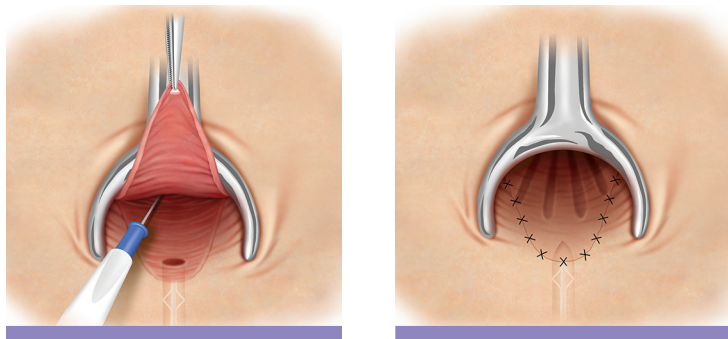
Please note: Your doctor may use a draining seton, which is different than a cutting seton. The draining seton is not tightened. It keeps the fistula open until your doctor performs an additional treatment.

Fibrin glue

Fibrin glue can be injected into an anal **fistula** to close it. Fibrin glue is made of blood proteins called **fibrinogen** and **thrombin** that cause blood to clot. When fibrin glue is used, it can block the fistula. This treatment does not involve cutting the anal **sphincter muscles**.

Advancement flap

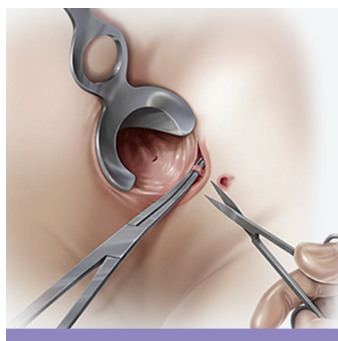
An endorectal advancement flap is a surgical procedure that treats deep **fistulas**. The word endorectal describes where this treatment takes place—inside the **rectum**. The procedure is performed in an operating room.



The doctor cuts and lifts a part, or flap, of the wall of the rectum next to the inside opening of the fistula. The doctor sews the flap over the fistula opening so that the fistula can heal. This treatment does not involve cutting the anal **sphincter muscles**.

LIFT

In a ligation of intersphincteric **fistula** tract (LIFT) procedure, a small, flat biologic graft is placed between two layers of the **anal sphincter**. This graft blocks the fistula so your body can begin healing the fistula naturally. This treatment does not involve cutting the anal **sphincter muscles**.



Not all treatment options are available in all countries. Discuss your options with your physician.

VAAFT

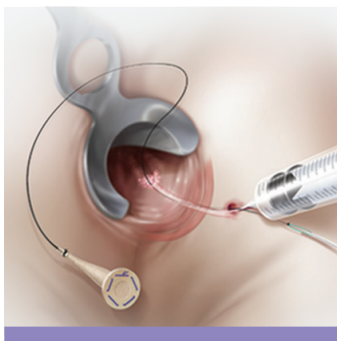
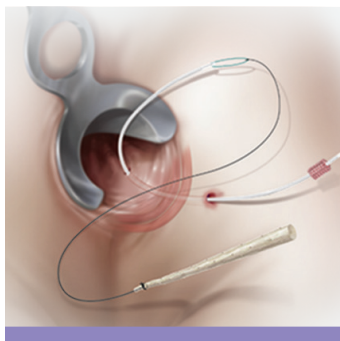
The video-assisted anal **fistula** treatment (VAAFT) technique involves identification of the internal fistula opening under direct visualization. The fistula is closed internally and then the fistula tract is cauterized using a specially designed **fistuloscope**.

FILAC

Fistula-tract Laser Closure (FiLaC) is a **sphincter muscle**-saving technique that uses a small, thin laser probe to destroy the fistula, with or without closing the internal opening.

Biologic fistula plug

A biologic **fistula** plug is a device made from natural material that can be used instead of a more invasive surgery to help your body heal itself. Your doctor uses a string to pull the plug into the fistula. The plug acts as a natural scaffold into which new tissue can grow to close the fistula.

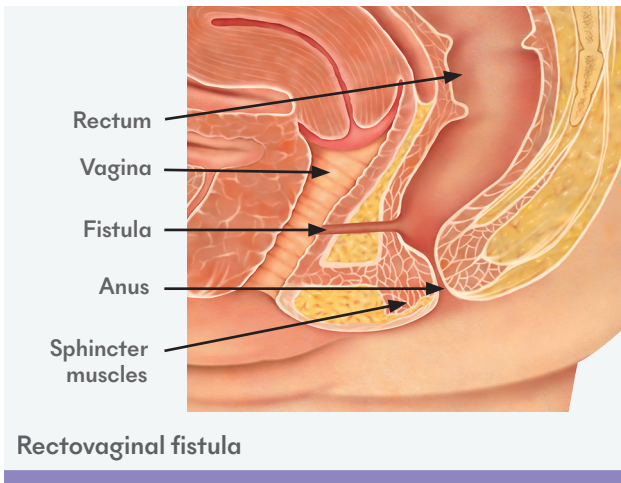


The plug will not remain in your body permanently. During the healing process, the plug is completely absorbed by your body. This treatment does not involve cutting the anal **sphincter muscles**.

Rectovaginal fistulas

What is a rectovaginal fistula?

A **fistula** is a small tunnel that goes from one surface in the body to another surface. A rectovaginal fistula goes from the **rectum** to the vagina.



What causes a rectovaginal fistula?

Rectovaginal **fistulas** can be caused by illness, cancer, radiation, inflammatory bowel disease, surgery or injury to the **perineum** during childbirth.

What are the signs and symptoms of a rectovaginal fistula?

The signs and symptoms of a rectovaginal **fistula** are similar to those of an anal fistula. These can include:

- Bowel contents (gas and stool) in the vagina
- Chills
- Fever
- Frequent and painful urination
- Itching around the anus
- Pain
- Pus and fluid drainage
- Swelling
- Tiredness
- Vaginal burning, itching, and discharge
- Weakness

How is a rectovaginal fistula diagnosed?

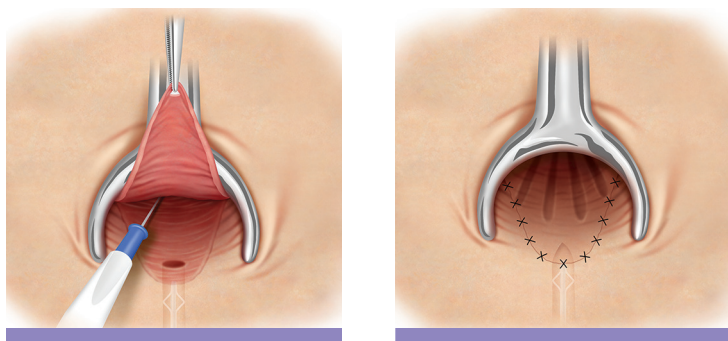
A doctor usually looks at the **rectum** and vagina for signs of a fistula. To look inside the rectum and lower part of the colon, the doctor often uses an **endoscope**, which is a thin, flexible tube with a light and a camera.

Rectovaginal fistula treatments

A rectovaginal **fistula** will not heal on its own. Antibiotics might help, but most rectovaginal fistulas need another form of treatment. Talk to your surgeon to learn more about your treatment options.

Advancement flap

An endorectal advancement flap is a surgical procedure that treats deep **fistulas**. The word endorectal describes where this treatment takes place—inside the **rectum**. The procedure is performed in an operating room.

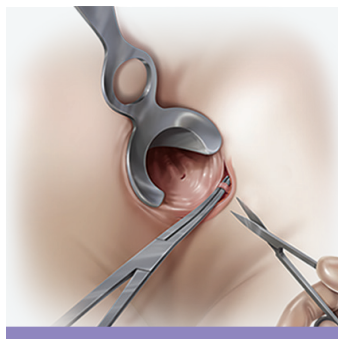


The doctor cuts and lifts a part, or flap, of the wall of the rectum next to the inside opening of the fistula. The doctor sews the flap over the fistula opening so that the fistula can heal. This treatment does not involve cutting the anal **sphincter muscles**.

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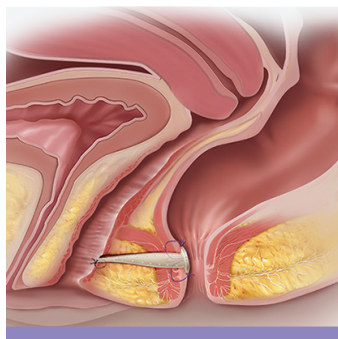
LIFT

In a ligation of intersphincteric **fistula** tract (LIFT) procedure, a small, flat biologic graft is placed between two layers of the **anal sphincter**. This graft blocks the fistula so your body can begin healing the fistula naturally. This treatment does not involve cutting the anal **sphincter** muscles.



Biologic rectovaginal fistula plug

A biologic rectovaginal **fistula** plug is a device made from a natural material that can be used instead of a more invasive surgery to help your body heal itself. Your doctor uses a string to pull the plug into the fistula. The plug acts as a natural scaffold into which new tissue can grow to close the fistula. The plug will not remain in your body permanently. During the healing process, the plug is completely absorbed by your body. This treatment does not involve cutting the anal **sphincter** muscles.



GLOSSARY

Abscess: A pocket of pus surrounded by swollen tissue

Anal canal: The short part of the intestine just inside the anus

Anal sphincter: The muscle that surrounds the anus

Anoscope: A small tube that doctors use to look inside the anus

Endoscope: A small tube, such as an anoscope, that doctors use to look inside hollow organs and body cavities

Fecal incontinence: A loss of control over bowel movements and gas

Fibrinogen: A protein in blood that helps blood clot

Fistula: A small tunnel that connects one surface in the body to another surface

Fistuloscope: A small tube that doctors use to look inside a fistula tract

Fistulotomy: A procedure in which a tunnel between two surfaces in the body (a fistula) is surgically opened

Perineum: The area between the anus and the vulva in females and the area between the anus and the scrotum in males

Rectum: The lowest six to eight inches of the large intestine, ending just before the anus

Seton: A string that is threaded through the skin and used to open an existing tunnel between two surfaces in the body

Sphincter muscles: Muscles that control an opening or passage in the body, such as the muscle that surrounds the anus (anal sphincter)

Thrombin: A protein in blood that helps blood clot

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