

What is perianal itch?

An itching sensation in and around the anus is called perianal itch. It may cause an intense desire to scratch, irritation, soreness, and a burning sensation in the anal area. Since perianal itch is a symptom rather than a condition, finding the underlying cause is an important first step in planning treatment.

What causes perianal itch?

Possible causes include infections (fungal, bacterial, pinworms, or sexually transmitted diseases), skin disorders, an underlying disease (e.g., diabetes or liver disease), certain medications (e.g., laxatives), and hemorrhoids. Some people have linked certain foods (e.g., caffeine, alcohol, peanuts, tomatoes) to perianal itch. The itch can be made worse by heat, moisture, poor hygiene, topical medications, or leaking stool.

When should you see a doctor?

See your family doctor if you have had perianal itch for more than a few days. Your doctor can help to find the cause and the best way to treat it. Your doctor will ask about your symptoms and medical history and will examine you physically.

What treatments help perianal itch?

Treating any underlying conditions is key. Your doctor may prescribe medications to treat an underlying infection or condition. You may also be prescribed medication (e.g., ointment containing hydrocortisone) to reduce the itch, but do not use these topical treatments for more than two weeks as they can harm your skin if used too long. Your doctor will give you instructions for applying the treatment.

Here are some measures you can take to help reduce the itch:

Keep the anus clean and dry:

- Bath or shower daily.
- Avoid using bubble bath, perfumes, or powders around the anus.
- Use water to gently clean the anal area; a handheld shower spray is helpful.
- Use only mild and unperfumed soaps around the anus, but make sure it is all rinsed off afterwards.
- Put underwear on only after the anus is completely dry.

Other self-care steps:

- Use soft toilet tissue.
- Wear loose-fitting cotton underwear and change it daily.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing.
- Adjust your bed clothing at night so you don't get too hot.
- Although the urge to scratch may be intense, try not to scratch as this can damage the skin and make the condition worse.
- Wear cotton gloves while sleeping so that you cause less damage to your skin if you scratch.

Diet:

- Reduce or eliminate certain foods to see if they may a difference (e.g., tomatoes, spicy foods, citrus fruits, nuts, chocolate, dairy products, coffee, beer, or wine).
- Increase fibre to help keep stools regular and well-formed by eating more grains (e.g., wholegrain bread), pulses (peas, beans, and lentils), oats, fruit, and vegetables.

Return to your doctor if your perianal itch does not improve after following these self-care measures. Your doctor may then refer you to a dermatologist or a colorectal specialist.

Sources:

- 1) NHS Choices. *Itchy bottom*. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/itchybottom/Pages/Introduction.aspx>.
- 2) Mount Sinai Hospital Patient Care. *Pruritis Ani*. <http://www.mountsinai.org/patient-care/health-library/diseases-and-conditions/pruritus-ani>.

