

What is anal itching?

Anal itching is the irritation of the skin at the exit of the rectum, known as the anus, accompanied by the desire to scratch. The intensity of anal itching increases from moisture, pressure, and abrasion caused by certain clothing and by excessive sitting. At its most intense, anal itching causes intolerable discomfort that often is described as burning and soreness. Anal itching is medically referred to as pruritus ani.

Causes of anal itching

It is sometimes difficult to discover the cause of chronic anal itching, and even more difficult to treat it. Anal itching can be caused by irritating chemicals in the foods we eat, such as are found in spices, hot sauces, and peppers. It also can be caused by the irritation of frequent liquid stools, diarrhea, or escape of small amounts of stool (incontinence). Diseases that increase the possibility of yeast infections, such as diabetes mellitus or HIV infection, as well as treatment with antibiotics can lead to a yeast infection and irritation of the anus. Psoriasis also can irritate the anus. Abnormal passageways (fistulas) from the small intestine or colon to the skin surrounding the anus can form as a result of disease (such as Crohn's disease), and these fistulas bring irritating fluids to the anal area. Other problems that can cause anal itching include pinworms, hemorrhoids, tears of the anal skin (fissures), and skin tags (abnormal local growth of anal skin).

Most cases of anal itching are caused by a harmless problem. Occasionally, however, anal itching can be a sign of more serious medical issues.

Other possible causes of anal itching include:

- Dry skin. As you age, skin in and around your anus is more prone to dryness. Dry skin can cause persistent, intense anal itching.
- Too much moisture. Moisture around your anus from excessive sweating or from moist, sticky stools can be irritating. Anal itching can also be caused by frequent diarrhea or the escape of small amounts of stool (fecal incontinence).
- Excessive washing. Excessive wiping with dry, harsh toilet paper or excessive scrubbing with harsh soaps can cause or aggravate anal itching. Failure to rinse away the soap completely also may cause irritation.
- Chemical irritants. Certain laundry soaps, colognes, douches and birth control products contain chemicals that can irritate skin in and around your anus. Scented or colored toilet paper can be irritating to people with sensitive skin.
- Food irritants. Anal itching may be the result of irritating chemicals in some foods, such as

those found in spices and hot sauces. Similarly, some foods may directly or indirectly irritate your anus as they exit your colon. Common culprits include chocolate, fruits, tomatoes, nuts and popcorn. Consuming certain beverages, including milk or caffeinated drinks, may cause some people to experience diarrhea followed by anal itching.

- Medications. Anal itching may be a side effect of certain medications, including some antibiotics that can cause frequent diarrhea.
- Overuse of laxatives. Excessive or improper use of laxatives can lead to chronic diarrhea and the risk of anal irritation and itching.
- Hemorrhoids. Hemorrhoids are engorged veins located just under the membrane that lines the lowest part of your rectum and anus. They often occur as a result of straining during a bowel movement. Anal itching can be a symptom of hemorrhoids. However, most hemorrhoids don't itch.
- Infections. Sexually transmitted diseases may also involve the anus and can cause anal itching. In children, the parasite that causes pinworms can cause persistent anal itching. Other parasites may cause similar itching.
- Skin disorders. Common skin problems — such as psoriasis, seborrhea and eczema — can involve and irritate the area in and around your anus.
- Yeast infections. This common infection, which usually affects women, can irritate your genital and anal areas.
- Anal abrasions and fissures. An anal abrasion is a small tear in your anus, usually caused by forced bowel movements through a tight anus. An anal fissure is a deeper tear. Both conditions can cause anal itching, as well as painful bowel movements and bleeding.
- Anal tumors. Rarely, benign or cancerous tumors in or around the anus may be a cause of anal itching.
- Other causes. Anal itching may be related to anxiety or stress. Sometimes, the cause remains undetermined.

Although anal itching is almost never a problem of cleanliness, your own actions may contribute to the problem. Whatever the cause of anal itching, your natural reaction is to scratch the area. But scratching worsens the problem by removing superficial layers of skin. In addition, the natural tendency in response to an irritation is to wash the area frequently with soap and a washcloth. However, excessive washing can aggravate the condition by removing your skin's natural protective oils.

