

How Can a Physical Therapist Treat Fecal Incontinence?

Because many symptoms of fecal incontinence are caused by pelvic floor muscle weakness and dysfunction, a specialty trained Pelvic Floor Physical Therapist is the ideal provider to help you gain control over your symptoms.

Physical therapists use their specialized training to perform a comprehensive evaluation and design a treatment program that is individualized for each patient.

Physical Therapy Treatment May Include:

- **Bowel training** to help people relearn how to control their bowel movements. In some cases, bowel training involves strengthening muscles; in others, it means training the bowels to empty at a specific time of day.
- **Biofeedback** is used to strengthen and coordinate the muscles and has helped some people with incontinence. Special computer equipment measures muscle contractions while the patient does exercises to strengthen the rectum and improve rectal sensation. This computer feedback shows how the muscles are working, whether or not the exercises are being done correctly, and whether the muscles are getting stronger.
- **Education** on diet and nutrition including proper fluid intake.
- **Training** on how to develop a regular pattern of bowel movements.
- **Electrical** stimulation to improve muscle awareness and strength.

Location

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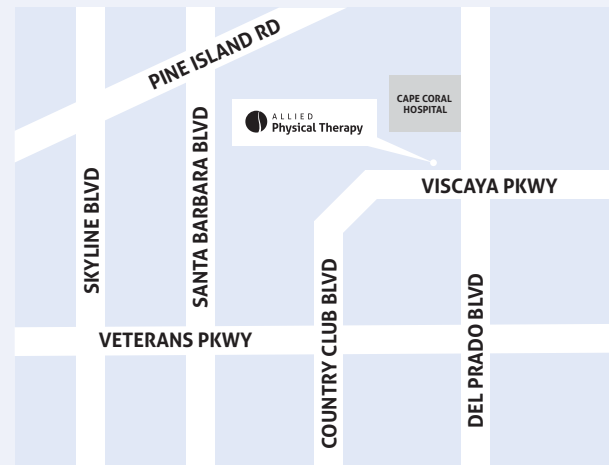
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Take Control of Fecal Incontinence with Physical Therapy



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*Experience the difference...
specialty trained therapists*

Causes of Fecal Incontinence

Fecal incontinence can have several causes:

- Constipation
- Damage to the anal sphincter muscles
- Nerve damage
- Loss of storage capacity in the rectum
- Diarrhea
- Pelvic floor dysfunction

Constipation

Constipation is one of the most common causes of fecal incontinence. Constipation causes large, hard stools to become lodged in the rectum. Watery stool can then leak out around the hardened stool. Constipation also causes the muscles of the rectum to stretch. This weakens the muscles, making it difficult to hold stool long enough for a person to reach a bathroom.

Muscle Damage

Fecal incontinence can be caused by injury to one or both of the ring-like muscles at the end of the rectum called the anal internal and external sphincters. Normal sphincters keep stool inside but, when damaged, the muscles aren't strong enough to do their job and stool can leak out. In women, the damage often happens when giving birth. The risk of injury is greatest if the doctor uses forceps to help deliver the baby or performs an episiotomy, which is a cut in the vaginal area to prevent it from tearing during birth. Hemorrhoid surgery can also damage sphincters.

Nerve Damage

Fecal incontinence can be caused by damage to the nerves that control the anal sphincters or the nerves that sense stool in the rectum. If the nerves that control the sphincters are injured, the muscles don't work properly and incontinence can occur. If the sensory nerves are damaged, they don't sense that stool is in the rectum so you won't feel the need to use the bathroom.

Nerve damage can be caused by childbirth, a long-term habit of straining to pass stool, stroke, physical disability due to injury, and diseases that affect the nerves such as Diabetes and Multiple Sclerosis.

Loss of Storage Capacity

Normally, the rectum stretches to hold stool until you can get to a bathroom. However, rectal surgery, radiation treatment, and inflammatory bowel disease can cause scarring that makes the walls of the rectum stiff and less elastic. The rectum then can't stretch as much to hold stool and fecal incontinence results. Inflammatory bowel disease also can irritate rectal walls, making them unable to contain stool.

Diarrhea

Diarrhea, or loose stool, is more difficult to control than solid stool because diarrhea fills the rectum with stool at a faster rate. Even people who don't have fecal incontinence can leak stool when they have diarrhea.

Pelvic Floor Dysfunction

Abnormalities of the pelvic floor muscles and nerves can cause fecal incontinence. Examples include:

- Impaired ability to sense stool in the rectum
- Decreased ability to contract muscles in the anal canal
- Dropping down of the rectum, a condition called Rectal Prolapse
- Protrusion of the rectum through the vagina, a condition called rectocele
- General weakness and sagging of the pelvic floor

Childbirth is often the cause of pelvic floor dysfunction and incontinence usually doesn't appear until the mid- forties or later.

Why a Physical Therapist?

Physical therapists are healthcare experts in evaluating and treating the muscles, joints, and the movement of the human body. Fecal incontinence is one of the many things that can happen as a result of weak muscles or dysfunction.

