

Loss of Stool

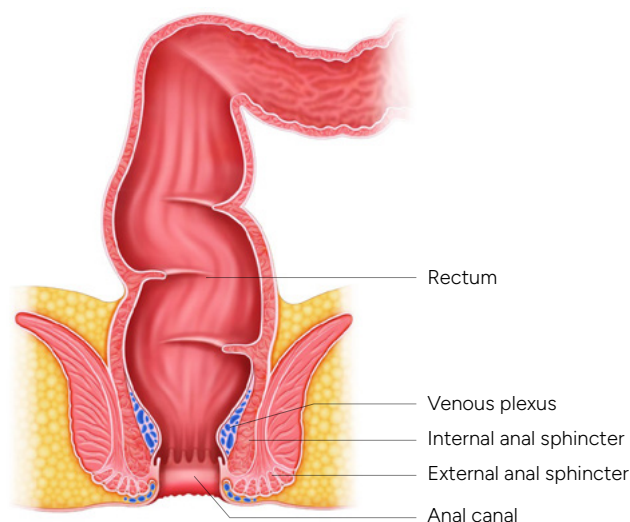
(Faecal or Anal Incontinence)

Faecal incontinence is the involuntary loss of stool, i.e. not while using the toilet. Understanding the structure and function of the rectum is a prerequisite for understanding the underlying mechanisms.

Anatomy and Function of the Rectum

The rectum is located above the anus in the pelvis. The filling of the rectum is felt as an urge to defecate. An internal and an external sphincter ensure that no stool passes unintentionally. The internal sphincter keeps the anal canal closed at rest. A network of veins, acting like a soft cushion, helps provide additional sealing. The external sphincter can be controlled voluntarily; it can actively hold when there is an urge or relax when we are on the toilet.

Normally, the rectum is empty. When it fills up, we feel the urge to defecate. If we are then unable to go to the toilet and our muscles are strong enough to keep the anus closed, the stool retracts back upwards and the urge recedes.



There are two possible causes for the loss of stool

1. The external sphincter is too weak. This is known as active faecal incontinence: loss of stool occurs when there is an urge to defecate because the sphincter cannot hold the anus shut strongly enough or long enough.
2. The internal sphincter is too weak or the anal canal is incompletely closed, e.g. due to haemorrhoids. This is known as passive faecal incontinence. Those affected often report unnoticed loss of stool regardless of the urge.

In both cases, the rectum may not be able to hold as much stool as usual.

Pelvic Floor Physiotherapy

In the case of active faecal incontinence, pelvic floor physiotherapy involves targeted training of the external sphincter muscle. Muscle strengthening is a process that requires daily practice and can take several months.

In the case of passive incontinence, the aim is to normalize stool consistency and, if necessary, adapt aids.

To normalize bowel function, behavioural strategies and, depending on requirements, balloon training, electrostimulation, nutritional fibre or medication are also used.

