

Laser treatment for anal fistulas

We are trialling a new laser procedure for the treatment for anal fistulas. This information leaflet explains more about the new treatment as well as information about surgical options.

What are anal fistulas and what causes them?

An anal fistula is a small tunnel that develops between the end of the bowel and the skin near the opening of your bottom (anus). It is usually caused by an infection which causes a collection of pus or abscess to form. When the pus drains away it can leave a small 'tunnel' or channel which can cause unpleasant symptoms such as discomfort and skin irritation. It does not usually get better or heal if left untreated and surgery is recommended in most cases.

Surgical treatment

There are several different procedures and the best option for you will depend on the position of your fistula and whether it's a single channel or branches off in different directions. You may need to have an initial examination of the area under general anaesthetic (where you're asleep) to help determine the best treatment. The surgeon will talk to you about the options available and which one they feel is the most suitable for you.

Surgery for an anal fistula is usually carried out under general anaesthetic. In many cases, it's not necessary to stay in hospital overnight afterwards.

The aim of surgery is to heal the fistula and avoid damaging the sphincter muscles (the ring of muscles that open and close the bottom or anus). Damaging these muscles could potentially result in loss of bowel control (incontinence).

The different types of surgery that can be used include:

- Fistulotomy.
- Seton techniques (where a surgical thread called a seton is used).
- Advancement flap procedure.
- LIFT procedure.

You can find detailed information about these procedures on the NHS website:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/anal-fistula/treatment/>

Like any type of treatment, surgical treatment carries a number of risks. The main risks are:

- **Infection** - this may require a course of antibiotics and in severe cases may need to be treated in hospital.
- **Recurrence of the fistula** - the fistula can sometimes come back.

- **Incontinence** - this is a potential risk with most types of treatment, although severe incontinence is rare and every effort will be made to prevent it.

The level of risk depends on where the fistula is, and the type of procedure or treatment used.

Laser treatment

We are trialling a new treatment using a laser. This treatment is offered as a day case procedure so most patients can go home the same day. The surgical team will advise on pain relief and when you can return to your normal everyday activities.

The treatment is carried out by inserting a very small flexible laser probe into the fistula tract and once it is in the correct position the laser destroys the fistula tissue allowing the tunnel to collapse and close while the probe is slowly pulled out. The treatment is relatively painless with a much quicker recovery time.

As this treatment is less invasive, the muscles that open and close the bottom (or anus) are protected with little or no risk of incontinence. The wound from the procedure is also minimal although you will notice some discharge as the wound heals.

You should be able to return to your everyday activities reasonably soon and your doctor will be able to advise on this.

Possible risks and complications

This procedure has a success rate of around 65% with the possibility of repeating the treatment with an over 70% secondary healing rate. The main complication is if the wound does not heal properly with a risk of re-infection or an abscess forming. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

What if I have concerns or questions?

If you have any concerns after your treatment, please call the General Surgery Department. Please see contact details below.

Trial information

Please note that at the moment we are trialling this procedure at Lister Hospital. During the trial period all patient outcomes will be subject to audit and monitored by our clinical effectiveness committee.

Further information

- **NHS Website** <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/anal-fistula/treatment/>

Useful contact details

East and North Hertfordshire Teaching NHS Trust:

- Website www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk
- Telephone 01438 314333

General Surgery Department:

- Telephone 01438 284331 (Monday to Friday, 8am – 5pm)

If you are calling out of hours and reach our voicemail service, please clearly state your full name, date of birth, hospital number, NHS number and telephone number and we will return your call the next working day.

NHS 111:

This phoneline can help if you think you need medical help right now. NHS 111 can direct you to the best place to get help if you cannot contact your GP during the day, or when your GP is closed (out-of-hours). It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

- Telephone 111

Leaflet information

You can request this information in a different format or another language; please speak to your doctor or nurse.

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