

## *The Window to the Soul*

Hemorrhoids – a dreaded word in any language, but so common it is certainly found in any country. No medical condition is more common and less understood than hemorrhoids, affecting nearly every age person in every medical state.

Hemorrhoids have afflicted mankind for millennia, being mentioned in ancient texts and even the Bible (Samuel 1, 5:12). The suffering caused by hemorrhoids hasn't changed, but the variety and success of the treatments for hemorrhoids certainly have changed through the years. Hemorrhoids were once treated by the traveling 'medicine man' offering to inject your hemorrhoids for relief. Now hemorrhoids are successfully treated through diet and medicine, an office procedure, and often surgery is not necessary at all.

Hemorrhoids are essentially veins, just like those on the back of your hand, but grouped together like a bunch of grapes. Everyone has two groups of these veins, called the internal and external hemorrhoidal varices. Everyone is born with the potential to have hemorrhoids, but only a select few are afflicted. Our low fiber American diet, coupled with not drinking enough water and spending too much time on the toilet, is the main cause for hemorrhoids. Most of the time, if we add some fiber to our diet, and begin a fiber supplement, hemorrhoids may resolve altogether and surgery is not necessary. Fiber holds water in the stool as it passes through the intestines, giving it bulk and increasing its transit. This prevents the constipation and straining that so often accompany the hemorrhoids.

Hemorrhoids are also called 'anal cushions', the theory is that these groups of veins swell when we move our bowels, creating a cushion for the anorectal muscle as the stool passes by. With time, a diet low in fiber, not drinking enough water, and straining while on the toilet, these hemorrhoidal veins swell, and begin to sag, thus creating the hemorrhoids. By increasing the fiber in our diet, starting a daily fiber supplement and drinking more water, those hemorrhoid veins shrink and the symptoms from the hemorrhoids resolve.

However, sometimes hemorrhoids persist despite our best efforts, and need additional therapy. Hemorrhoids can be classified as internal or external, depending on their location. Internal hemorrhoids often bleed, are not painful, but sometimes extend through the anus and need to be pushed back inside after a bowel movement. These can be treated by 'banding' in the office – a relatively painless procedure that takes less than a minute. External hemorrhoids that are located on the outside of the anus often swell and can be quite painful. External hemorrhoids usually need surgery to remove the tissue and alleviate the symptoms.

Horror stories for hemorrhoid surgery are common, but are not always accurate. I like to compare hemorrhoid surgery to plastic surgery – cutting away the tissue that isn't needed or is causing problems, and putting it back together for a beautiful and functional result. New surgical techniques allow the surgery to be nearly painless with minimal recovery time.

Not all bleeding is from hemorrhoids, and a physician will often ask if you have had a colonoscopy. A colonoscopy is a life-saving, outpatient procedure that is used to evaluate rectal bleeding and the severity of the hemorrhoids. Hemorrhoids can cause multiple symptoms (pain, bleeding, itching, swelling, difficulty with control of your bowel movements, leakage, etc.) – but these symptoms may in fact represent something else. An anal fissure (a cut in the anus) can cause horrible pain, an anal fistula (remnant of an infection) may cause leakage, and itching may represent a condition called pruritis ani, and no one has ever come to my office to tell me that “my rectal cancer is bleeding”.

In closing, hemorrhoids are very common, and everyone has the potential to suffer from hemorrhoids. Our American diet may be delicious, but can also cause significant problems. Before you pray to the Patron Saint of Hemorrhoids, Saint Fiacre, please consider coming to the office for evaluation. If you suffer from any of the above symptoms – rectal bleeding, blood in the stool or with bowel movements, anal itching, swelling, leakage, pain, or have constipation or diarrhea – please call today for an appointment.