

Fistula Treatment with Setons

This handout explains fistula treatment with setons and home care instructions.

Setons For Fistula Treatment

A seton is made of rubber or string-like material used to treat a fistula. It can be used by itself, combined with a fistulotomy, or used in stages (for example, first the seton, then later surgery.)

Setons can help the fistula heal by keeping the tract open. This allows fluid to drain and the fistula to heal. You may need a seton before the final surgery to fix the fistula. The doctor will remove the seton during the final surgery.

Setons are also used to slowly move through a fistula when the anal sphincter muscle is involved. The slow healing creates a scar, closing the tract as it heals.

In some cases, we may need to change the seton every 4-6 weeks in outpatient surgery. Some people need setons for 6 months or longer. There is no time limit, as keeping the tract open prevents future abscesses.

Drainage

Expect drainage until the fistula heals. Wear pads to manage the drainage and check it regularly. The drainage can cause a skin rash so you may want to use a protective cream **before** any skin problems start. Apply the cream to dry skin so you don't trap moisture under the ointment.

Some options of protective creams include:

- A&D® Ointment
- Desitin
- Sensicare®

Bathing

Sitz baths 3-4 times a day will help keep the area clean, promote drainage, and may help with the pain. Apply the ointment after these soaks.

Pain

Pain varies from person to person. Your care team will work with you on a pain management plan.

Activities

Follow the guidelines we give you the day of the surgery. They may include:

- Taking off work for a few days to a week.
- Having someone help watch your children for 1-2 days.
- Wearing loose clothes.
- **Avoiding** all tobacco including second- hand smoke.

Constipation

Opioid pain medicines can cause constipation. You will want to use a stool softener (docusate sodium) or laxative to prevent this problem. Drinking enough fluids will also help to prevent constipation.

When to Call

Call the clinic if you have:

- Problems with bowel movements
- Excess swelling
- A fever over 100.4°F for two readings, taken by mouth, four hours apart
- Severe pain
- Bleeding that does not stop after 10 minutes of applied pressure to the anal area

Who to Call

Digestive Health Center
(608) 242-2800

After hours, weekends, or holidays this number will be answered by the paging operator. Ask for the colorectal surgery doctor on call. Leave your name and phone number with area code. The doctor will call you back.

The toll-free number is: **(855) 342-9900**.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 12/2025 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#7123