

Title: Fistulas and fissures and their association with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

What are fissures and fistulas?

1. Fistula: A fistula is an abnormal connection or passageway that forms between two organs or between an organ and the skin.¹ In the context of IBD, fistulas most commonly occur in the anal region.² They can develop as a result of chronic inflammation, due to Crohn's disease, which is a type of IBD. Because of the deep ulcerations that Crohn's disease causes in the bowel, fistulas are more common with Crohn's than ulcerative colitis, another form of IBD.³

Fistulas in IBD often form when ulcers or inflammation penetrate through the entire thickness of the bowel wall, creating a tunnel that connects the affected area to nearby organs, tissues, or even the skin around the anus. These connections allow the passage of bodily fluids, such as stool, mucus, or pus, and may lead to signs and symptoms such as pain, swelling, drainage, and infections.⁴

Perianal fistulas are abnormal connections between the anal canal or rectum and an opening in the skin near the anus.⁴

Symptoms of an anal fistula include:⁴

- Anal pain when having a bowel movement
- Redness and swelling inside or around your anus
- Fluid drainage from around the anus
- Blood in the stool

Fistulas in IBD may be very painful and complex to patients. They may require medical intervention, such as IBD medications, antibiotics, and/or surgical procedures, to promote healing and prevent complications.

¹ U.S. National Library of Medicine. (n.d.). *Fistula: Medlineplus medical encyclopedia*. MedlinePlus. Accessed November 2023. <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002365.htm>

² Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2022, August 6). Crohn's disease. Mayo Clinic. Accessed December 2023. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/crohns-disease/symptoms-causes/syc-20353304>

³ Tan, Z., Zhu, S., Liu, C., Meng, Y., Li, J., Zhang, J., & Dong, W. (2023). Causal Link between Inflammatory Bowel Disease and Fistula: Evidence from Mendelian Randomization Study. *Journal of clinical medicine*, 12(7), 2482. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm12072482>

⁴ Fistula Removal. Crohn's & Colitis Foundation. (n.d.). Accessed December 2023. <https://www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org/what-is-crohns-disease/treatment/surgery/fistulizing-crohns-disease>

2. Fissure: A fissure refers to a small tear or ulceration that develops in the anus and may cause itching or bleeding. While fissures can occur in anyone, they are commonly associated with IBD, particularly Crohn's disease.^{5,6}

Inflammation and chronic bowel movements can cause the delicate tissues of the anal canal to become thin, leading to the development of fissures. They are often accompanied by symptoms such as severe anal pain, bleeding, itching, and discomfort during bowel movements.⁶

Some of the signs and symptoms of a fissure include:⁶

- Pain during a bowel movement
- Bright red blood the stool or toilet paper after a bowl movement
- Pain even after having a bowl movement
- Small lump on the skin near the anal fissure

Fissures can sometimes heal on their own with proper self-care and lifestyle modifications. However, if they persist or become recurrent, medical treatments may be necessary, and in some cases, surgery.⁶

Experiencing a Fissure or Fistula

Both fistulas and fissures are potential complications of IBD, particularly Crohn's disease. The chronic inflammation and ulceration associated with IBD may weaken the intestinal walls, making them susceptible to the formation of these abnormal connections or tears. Managing the underlying inflammation through medical treatment, lifestyle changes, and regular monitoring is crucial to reduce the risk and impact of fistulas and fissures.³

Experiencing a fistula or fissure can often be overwhelming. You may experience new symptoms that can be painful and take a long time to heal. Depending on where the fistula is, it can make it hard to sit down or even get comfortable, and you could develop an infection if not treated properly. Fissures are different in that they are not an abnormal tunnel that has developed—they are more like small tears in the anus—but can cause very similar symptoms as a fistula.

⁵ *Signs and symptoms of crohn's disease*. Crohn's & Colitis Foundation. (n.d.-b). Accessed December 2023. <https://www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org/what-is-crohns-disease/symptoms>

⁶ Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2022b, December 31). *Anal fissure*. Mayo Clinic. Accessed December 2023. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/anal-fissure/symptoms-causes/syc-20351424>

If you believe you have an anal fissure or a fistula it is important to speak with your physician to be properly evaluated as these may lead to an infection. It is also important to make sure you understand what the treatment options are and what you should be doing, so here are some potential questions to ask your physician:

- What are the treatment options?
- Will I need surgery?
- How can we help improve my quality of life, especially related to the pain caused by a fistula or fissure?
- Are there any specific dietary restrictions I should follow?
- What are the potential complications I could have and what should I watch out for?

Dealing with physical discomfort, emotional distress, and the challenges associated with having a fissure or fistula can really impact your overall quality of life. Because of how fistulas and fissures can affect you, there may be times where you feel like you are alone and unsure of when it will heal.

Try to remember that you are not alone. There is a community of patients and caregivers available to support you. If it becomes too overwhelming, it is always best to talk openly with your physician about how they can also help you manage the emotional impact of having the fistula or fissure.

Disclaimer: *This resource was developed by an IBD Social Circle patient advocate who has been compensated for their time. This content is informational, does not reflect all patient journeys, is not intended to be taken as medical advice and should not replace the recommendations and advice of your healthcare provider.*