

Pile iton

For World Piles Day this Sunday, **Aneeta Sundararaj** gets to the bottom of that painful condition



The rubberband used to help patients with piles

"Sometimes, patients come to see me only when they develop complications. This means that there has been so much bleeding that they are anaemic."

Dr Tee Shin San,
colorectal surgeon

Imagine going about your daily tasks when, suddenly, you're dying to scratch the itch in the region of your anus. You run to the toilet to avoid possible humiliation.

But it's worse there as you discover there's blood in your excreta. Don't panic! You could be suffering from a treatable condition — piles.

"Piles is the layman's term for haemorrhoids," explains Dr Tee Shin San, a consultant general and colorectal surgeon at Assunta Hospital in Petaling Jaya.

In simple terms, the anus is surrounded by blood vessels. If a person exerts force on these vessels when defecating, they become inflamed, bulge, swell, bleed or cause pain and discomfort. When any of these conditions occur, the patient may be diagnosed as suffering from piles.

"Most patients I see tend to be older, but I've also seen cases of piles in patients as young as 16. Also, many women in the late stages of pregnancy suffer from piles. This is probably because they are not consuming as much liquid to avoid developing swollen legs.

"Furthermore, there is enormous pressure on their rectum during this time."

DEGREES OF SEPARATION

There are four grades of this disease. First degree piles occurs when it appears internally. Second degree piles is visible outside the

body, but reduces on its own. Third degree piles is visible outside the body and the patient pushes it back in manually. Finally, in fourth degree piles, it exists externally all the time.

"Sometimes, people develop piles because they have habits.

They've been told that they must empty their bowels every day. So, when they can't, they force themselves to defecate. Using such force is what makes it very painful. The pattern of defecation is different for each person."

Dr Tee says there are people who defecate twice a day and there are others who only do so once in two days. "There is nothing wrong with these people. They are not constipated. The important thing is that they must not use force when defecating."

When he suspects piles, Dr Tee will take a detailed history of the patient and then carry out a rectal examination. In more severe cases, and to rule out something more sinister, Dr Tee will suggest that the patient undergo a clinical colonoscopy.

For less severe cases, Dr Tee advocates conservative treatment. "This means a lifestyle change." Although there is no documented evidence that certain spices cause constipation, he suggests that patients refrain from eating spicy food. "Fruits such as papaya, banana, prunes, pears and apples will provide fibre and make the stools soft."

SOFTENING THE BLOW

There are also medicines to make the stools soft, shrink the piles and increase the tone of the blood vessels. In certain cases, suppositories are used so that there is a lubricating effect when the patient def-

ecates, thereby, reducing the pain he endures.

Alternatively, Dr Tee may carry out a procedure called Rubber Banding. As its name suggests, a rubber band is fixed around the base of the visible haemorrhoid. With blood flow constricted, the haemorrhoid will eventually fall off.

"Sometimes, patients come to see me only when they develop complications. This means there has been so much bleeding that they are anaemic. They also develop blood clots in the blood vessels which are now ulcerated. They are in such pain that they can't even sit down."

In such serious cases, surgery is often necessary. Dr Tee's preferred method is the PPH Stapler. Much like a staple gun, he will excise the piles during a short surgery. "There is less pain and bleeding, and no external wound that needs to heal. The patient can go back to leading a normal life very quickly," he explains.

Ultimately, the message that Dr Tee wants to convey is this: "I want people to know that piles is a treatable condition. This is why we've organised this camp on haemorrhoids — the first of its kind in the country. Seek treatment for piles before it becomes complicated and you suffer unnecessary pain."

Don't suffer in silence

SEEKING HELP One morning about five years ago, Mr Lim (not his real name), 30, woke up to find his bed clothes stained with blood.

"I was so worried," he says. "I thought I had cancer." Ashamed, he did not seek treatment. "Actually, I didn't know who to turn to," he adds. "You know how we Asians are always told to 'shut up and not talk about such things.'"

He searched for information on the Internet, but didn't get very far, "because I didn't even know what to look for". "There are so many other conditions which have the same signs and symptoms."

Finally, he couldn't bear it anymore, so he sought medical attention. The first doctor he visited, prescribed worm medication. Three months later and feeling no better, he finally confided in his mother who insisted that he visited a specialist immediately.

Luckily, Lim was only suffering from the initial stages of piles and the treatment he received was confined to topical medication and the use of suppositories.

He feels that his condition first manifested when he went to college. "It was not like in school when you can go back home to eat. I was eating fast food every day. This continued when I started to work. I had little exercise and at parties, there's always finger food and sweetened drinks. There's zero fibre in these things."

Now, heeding the advice of his doctors, Lim has changed his lifestyle completely. He's stopped smoking and consuming alcohol. He exercises regularly and eats healthy portions of fruit and vegetables every day. So far, there has been no recurrence of the disease and Lim feels comfortable at all times.

He advises: "If you see changes in 'the places where the sun doesn't shine', seek help immediately. Don't suffer in silence."

Signs of piles

- Your stools are covered with bright red blood.
- You may not necessarily suffer from pain but there are abnormalities and bumps in the region of your anus.
- Every time you pass motion, you experience pain and irritation.
- Mucus develops which causes itchiness.

To commemorate World Piles Day, Assunta Hospital is organising a Haemorrhoid Camp this Sunday from 9am to 1pm. For details, call the hospital's Marketing Communications Department at 03-7872 3106.



Piles is treatable, says Dr Tee