

Your Journey with Perianal Disease



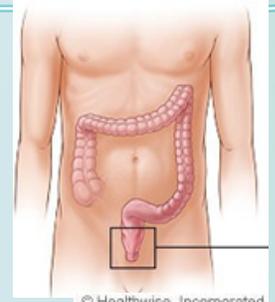
For more information scan this QR code or go to myhealth.alberta.ca/perianal-disease-pathway

Perianal disease includes hemorrhoids and anal fissures. These topics are described in more detail on page 4. You are the most important part of your healthcare team. This guide will help you to know what to expect as you work with your team. If you have any questions along the way, please ask your healthcare team. Click on the page numbers in blue if you want more information about the step in your journey.

Before your appointment (page 5)

- Write down how you feel, your symptoms, and any questions or concerns.
- You may see blood in the toilet after a bowel movement, and you may have itching or pain in your perianal area. Never assume blood is from hemorrhoids, always seek medical attention for blood in your bowel movements.

The lowest portion of your bowels is the **rectum**. The **anus** is at the end of the rectum and is the part that stool passes through. The anus and the area around it is called the **perianal region**.



© Healthwise, Incorporated

Visit your healthcare provider (page 7)

- In order to better manage your health condition, your healthcare provider needs to hear from you and understand what matters to you.
- Share all your symptoms and concerns. Your health includes physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, and social elements.
- Your healthcare provider may need to look at and feel around your perianal region.
- Consider bringing a family member or friend to support you.

Get your assessment & tests (page 8)

- Your healthcare provider may do a digital rectal exam (DRE). This involves inserting their gloved and lubricated finger into your rectum to feel for anything abnormal.
- Lab investigations are uncommon but may be used to rule out other conditions in the early stages.

Review your assessment & test results (page 10)

- Your healthcare provider will discuss the result of the digital rectal exam and next steps with you right away.
- If you are sent for tests, talk with your healthcare provider so you know what your test results mean.

Review your treatment & prevention options (page 11)

- You may need to change what you eat and drink, your activity levels, and your bathroom habits. This may help with current perianal problems and may help prevent future problems.
- Your healthcare provider may suggest creams, ointments, or pills that you can get at a drug store.

Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral (page 13)

- Most patients will not need to see a specialist (general surgeon).
- The need to see a specialist is based on how long you've had the perianal problem, what you have tried to relieve your symptoms, what your healthcare provider sees and feels during your exam, and what may be causing perianal problems to occur.

Start your treatment & watch your symptoms (page 14)

- If you have a fever, smelly discharge, or frequent liquid bowel movements (diarrhea), make sure to tell your healthcare team.
- Take an active role in your care. Write down what you feel, what you notice, and what you were doing when you noticed problems.

Keep taking care of yourself (page 15)

- Keep taking care of your overall health.
- Look for other healthy lifestyle resources and supports.



Whole-person health (page 2)

Important Tips:

Need a family doctor?

ahs.ca/findadoctor

Need a translator?

Let your healthcare provider know

Need health advice?

Call Health Link at 811

Need to find programs and services in your community?

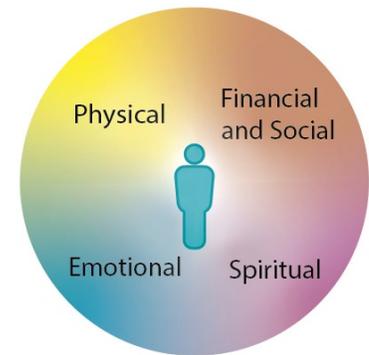
Call 211 or visit ab.211.ca

Whole-person health

The whole-person health approach will help you and your healthcare team better manage your health condition. It is drawn from the teachings of the medicine wheel.

Whole-person health means thinking about all parts of your health and wellness: physical, financial and social, spiritual, and emotional. All of these parts are connected and influence each other. It's important to be aware of your personal needs in each part and to share that information with your healthcare team.

- **Physical:** your specific health conditions and how well your body works
- **Financial and Social:** your ability to meet your housing, transportation, food, and health needs, feeling supported to manage your daily life, and having meaningful relationships
- **Spiritual:** your beliefs, sense of connection, and purpose
- **Emotional:** how you think, feel, and cope with life events



Whole-person health

Whole-person health also reminds us that we are all connected and work together: you, your support systems, and your healthcare providers. Your healthcare providers could be your doctor, nurse practitioner, or a team that comes together with you to plan and organize your care.

Your healthcare provider needs to understand who you are and what matters to you. This helps to build trust. But it can be hard to know what to share or what to say. Try starting by asking yourself:

“What are the things in my life that are important to me?”

“What are the things in my life that may be affecting my health and well-being?”



Continued on next page.

Here are some examples of things you may want to talk about with your healthcare provider:



Physical

“My symptoms are making it hard for me to do my job.”

“Because of my pain and how hard it is for me to move around, it’s hard to take care of myself.”

Financial and Social

“I’m worried I won’t be able to get to all of my appointments.”

“I need my daughter with me as a translator.”

“I’m not sure how I will pay for my medications this month.”

Emotional

“I’m lonely and have no one to talk to.”

“I have a lot of stress and I’m not sure how to manage it.”

“Ever since my friend died, I’ve been struggling with my feelings.”

Spiritual

“It’s important that I follow traditional healing practices.”

“How can I include my culture’s foods and family recipes in my nutrition plan?”

“It’s important that my religious practice of fasting is respected and brought into my care.”

What is perianal disease?

Perianal is the term used to refer to the area around the anus. There are a few important body parts to know about when you are preparing to discuss perianal problems with your healthcare team:

Anus: The small opening at the end of your intestines that bowel movements pass through.

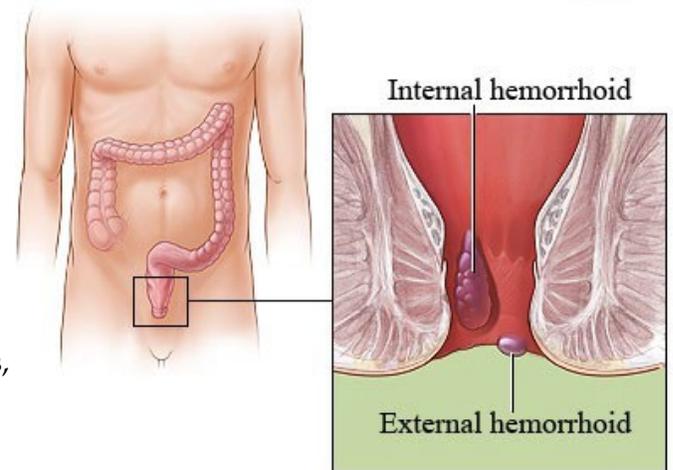
Rectum: The part of your intestines inside your anus.

Colon: The part of your intestines just above your rectum.

Two common disease conditions that can affect the perianal region are:

Hemorrhoids (sometimes called "piles"): Swollen veins in your rectum (internal hemorrhoids), or on your anus (external hemorrhoids). Hemorrhoids can be itchy, painful, and they may bleed.

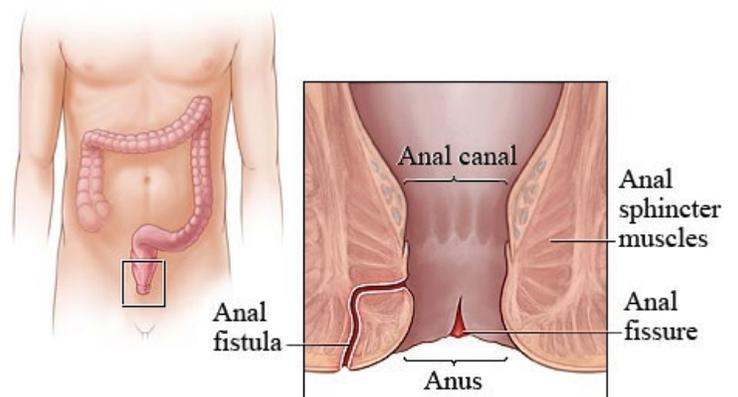
Most hemorrhoids will heal on their own but if they are very painful or bothersome, if you are concerned, or if they last longer than two weeks, see your healthcare team and they can help support your treatment at home.



© Healthwise, Incorporated

Anal Fissures: Small tears in your anus. Anal fissures often cause a stinging or burning feeling when you have a bowel movement. You may notice blood on toilet paper after wiping. The pain may last for several hours after a bowel movement.

While some anal fissures may heal on their own without treatment, if they last longer than a few days or symptoms worsen or you are concerned, please see your healthcare provider and they can help support your treatment at home.



Before your appointment

Everyone will have their own unique journey with perianal disease. How you move through your journey, the number of visits with your healthcare team, the steps you will take, and the order you take them in will depend on your individual needs and will be decided in partnership with your healthcare team. Always follow the specific recommendations from your healthcare team.

Even though perianal problems are very common, many people find them difficult to talk about with others. Your healthcare provider understands that perianal problems can be hard to talk about, and they are there to support you. Seeking support early can help make management easier and will help you resolve your current perianal problem and prevent future perianal problems from occurring.

Here are a few tips to help you get ready for your appointment with your healthcare provider:

- **Watch for symptoms.** Common symptoms to have with perianal disease are:
 - Itching in the perianal region
 - Pain in the perianal region
 - Feeling a lump in the perianal region
 - Bleeding from the perianal region (may notice blood in toilet after a bowel movement or blood on toilet paper after wiping)
- **Consider using a symptom tracker** to capture important information to share with your healthcare team about your symptoms: How you feel, how long symptoms last, and what makes the symptoms better and worse (see [Helpful Tools & Resources](#) below for link).
- **Book your appointment:** Call your healthcare team's office and book your appointment. If you feel uncomfortable sharing the reason for your appointment with the staff at your healthcare provider's office when booking your appointment, you can always say 'it's personal' and then share the details about the reason for your visit with your healthcare provider when you see them.
- **Medications:** Your healthcare provider will need to know about all of the medications you take (herbal, over-the-counter, and prescription) at your appointment. This includes any creams or ointments that you have used to manage your perianal problem. You can bring a list, take photos on your phone or bring a bag with your medications. Knowing about all of your medications will help your healthcare provider determine what might be causing the perianal problem (for example, some medications cause hard stool and constipation) and what has worked or has not worked to relieve your perianal disease symptoms.
- **Type and number of bowel movements:** Your healthcare provider will ask questions about your bowel movements (soft or hard), number of bowel movements in a day and how long you spend on the toilet having a bowel movement. The Bristol Stool chart can be used to help you describe the types of bowel movements you are experiencing ([Bowel and Symptom Journal](#)).

- Understand your **family history of bowel problems**. Try to learn more about any perianal and bowel problems your birth mother, birth father, and siblings may have experienced.
- Ask someone you trust to go with you to your appointment. They can help you ask questions, write down instructions, and remember explanations.



Helpful tools and resources

Use a **symptom tracker (HQCA)**: hqca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HQCA-Symptom-Tracker-March-23-2022.pdf

To get the most out of your visit, plan to write notes during the visit or see the Alberta Health Services **My Care Conversations app** (ahs.ca/careapp) website for more information about recording your conversation with your healthcare provider.

When should I go to the emergency department or urgent care?

Go to the emergency department, or call 911 if:

- Your bleeding is severe. If the bleeding is flowing or continuous, call 911 or go to the emergency department immediately.
- Your perianal pain is severe.
- You feel light-headed, especially with bleeding.



Visit your healthcare provider

Your healthcare provider will ask you about your symptoms, your medications and your history. They will use the information that you provide to better help them understand your condition and how it may be impacting you. In most cases, they will need to look at the affected area and perform a physical exam.

What should I tell my healthcare provider?

- The impact the health condition or issue is having on things that are important to you, like your job, hobbies and interests, and relationships. It's important to talk about these things with your healthcare provider because they all play a role in your health and well-being.
- What has worked for you in the past to manage your current condition?
- What types of things help you work better with your healthcare team and what you expect and need from the relationship with your healthcare provider?

You are the most important part of your healthcare team.

If you don't understand what your healthcare team is telling you, let them know right away. Be open and honest. You might say:

"This is new to me. Could you please explain it slowly, using language that is easier to understand?"

"It sounded like you said that I should... Did I understand that correctly?"

"Can you show me a picture or model to help me understand?"



Helpful tools and resources

- Making the most of your appointment: myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?Hwid=hw226888
- Working with your healthcare team: hqca.ca/for-patients-and-families/working-with-your-healthcare-team



In addition to your healthcare provider looking at your perianal region, they may also do some tests and assessments to help find the cause of your symptoms and to rule out other health problems. These may include:

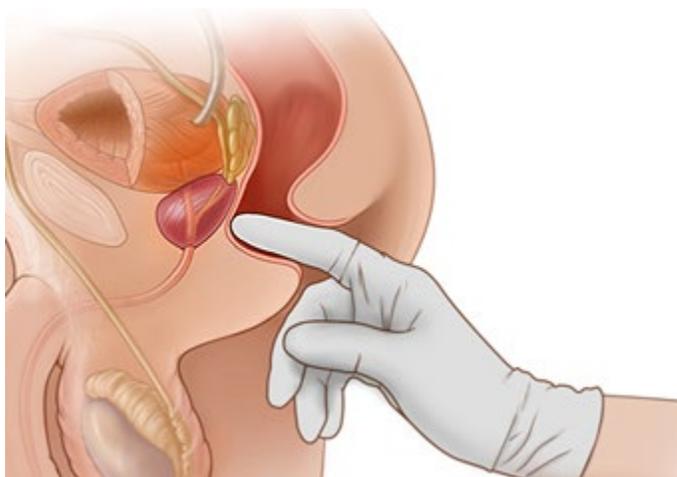
1) Digital Rectal Exam (DRE)

A Digital Rectal Exam is a common exam for perianal problems. You do not need to do anything to prepare for this test. If there is uncertainty about the location or cause of bleeding, a vaginal exam may also be needed.

What should I expect?

Your Digital Rectal Exam will be done in a private room. You will be asked to change (in privacy) and sit or lay on the exam bed. You will be provided with a gown or sheet to cover yourself. When your healthcare provider comes in, they will discuss the symptoms you are experiencing and describe the Digital Rectal Exam procedure. You may be offered a chaperon like a nurse or a support person who is at the appointment with you. If a chaperon is not offered and you would like to have one, please let your healthcare provider know.

For the procedure, you will be placed in a position that will make the exam easier and more comfortable for you. Once you are ready, your healthcare provider will gently insert a gloved and lubricated finger into your anus and they will feel for anything that may not be normal.



© Healthwise, Incorporated

A Digital Rectal Exam is a mildly uncomfortable procedure, and you might:

- Feel the need to pee
- Feel like you will have a bowel movement (this will not actually happen)
- Males may have an erection

The Digital Rectal Exam itself lasts only a few seconds. Once the exam is done, your healthcare provider will discuss the findings and then leave the room so that you can get dressed in privacy.

After your Digital Rectal Exam

- You may return to normal activities immediately.
- During your appointment, your healthcare provider will advise if you should expect mild bleeding and what is considered normal or abnormal.
- Contact your healthcare team if your symptoms get worse, you experience symptoms your healthcare provider told you to watch for, or you are not getting better in the expected time your healthcare provider shared.

Results

Your healthcare provider may be able to tell you the results of the test right away. Based on the findings of the Digital Rectal Exam, you and your healthcare provider will discuss next steps.

2) Lab Tests

Lab tests are uncommon but may be used to determine how much blood you have lost, or to rule out other conditions that may be causing your symptoms or any complications.



Review your assessment & test results

It is important to know what your test results are and what they mean for you personally. Take time to discuss your results with your healthcare provider. Medical terms can be hard to understand. And even common words like “positive” or “negative” might mean something different for medical tests. Ask your healthcare provider for explanations and examples to make sure you fully understand.

You might ask:

“What does this mean for me?”

“Is there a current concern? If so, what is it?”



Helpful tools and resources

You may find some of your results and health information using secure online tools:

MyHealth Records

See your lab results, immunizations, and some other results with a MyHealth Records account. Sign up at myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords.

MyAHS Connect

See your health information, manage your Alberta Health Services appointments, and interact directly with some members of your healthcare team. Ask your healthcare provider how to access your MyAHS Connect account. Learn more at ahs.ca/myahsconnect.





Review your treatment & prevention options

Taking steps to prevent perianal problems like hemorrhoids and fissures is the most important thing you can do to manage these conditions. Perianal problems often return after treatment if important changes to diet, activity, and bathroom habits are not made. In some cases, surgery is needed to repair the problem, but this is only a temporary fix if lifestyle changes are not made.

When they do occur, many treatment options exist for perianal problems. You will work with your healthcare provider to determine the best treatment options for you. Asking the following questions can help you make an informed decision about your different treatment options and decide which ones will work best for you:

"What are the advantages and disadvantages of each treatment option?"

"Can I use any of these treatment options together?"

"How will this treatment make me feel? Will it have side effects?"

"What results can I expect?"



Diet and fluid intake recommendations

Your main dietary goals should be to eat enough dietary fibre and drink enough fluids (non-caffeinated and non-alcoholic) to ensure healthy bowel movements. Fibre supplements (e.g., Psyllium fibre) can be used to help you meet your dietary fibre needs. It is very important to drink lots of water when taking fibre supplements. There are resources available to help you understand more about a healthy diet to prevent perianal diseases ([Getting Enough Fibre](#)). Your healthcare provider may recommend that you see a dietitian. You can also call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk with a registered dietitian.

Healthy bathroom habits

Sitting on the toilet for long periods can lead to hemorrhoids and anal fissures. Pushing or straining too hard to have a bowel movement (often due to constipation) can also create perianal problems.

A helpful way to remember the steps to take for healthy bathroom habits is TONE.

T = Three minutes or less on the toilet having a bowel movement

O = One bowel movement each day

N = No straining and no mobile phone / reading on the toilet

E = Enough dietary fibre (if you get enough fibre, the other goals of T – O – N will be easier)

Activity, rest, and weight

Your healthcare provider may discuss activity and weight recommendations with you. Being active can help prevent constipation as it promotes movement of your bowels. Your healthcare provider may recommend some specific exercises, and the [Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines](#) give general recommendations for physical activity. Always consult your healthcare provider before starting a new activity program.



Rest is also important to allow perianal problems to heal.

Maintaining a healthy body weight is important for many factors related to your health and well-being. Being overweight or having obesity can put extra pressure on the blood vessels in your bowels, which can lead to perianal problems like hemorrhoids. Your healthcare provider is available to support you should you want to explore healthy weight loss options.

Hygiene practices

Showering and bathing regularly is enough to keep your perianal region clean. It is important not to irritate the perianal region with too much washing, as that can make perianal issues worse. Be gentle. Use warm water and a fragrance-free soap, or use baby wipes or medicated pads such as Tucks.

Wear cotton underwear and loose clothing to decrease moisture and rubbing around your perianal region. Avoid thong-style underwear.

Easing symptoms

Perianal conditions can cause a range of symptoms from itchiness to pain. The options to ease discomfort are all focused on reducing swelling and lubricating the area.

Sitz bath

A sitz bath is a shallow warm-water bath that you sit in. The warm water can help ease pain by relaxing the muscles around your anus and increasing blood flow to the area to help the healing process. A sitz bath does not require any special equipment. You will want to sit in shallow warm water for 10 to 15 minutes several times a day. Do not add anything to the water like Epsom salts or bath oils. Just use warm (not hot) water (40 degrees C/104 degrees F). After each bath, pat the area dry (do not rub).

Over-the-counter creams and ointments

Non-prescription, also known as over-the-counter, creams, and ointments (e.g., Preparation H and Witch Hazel) are widely available in pharmacies. It is important to know that over-the-counter creams and ointments will not cure your hemorrhoids, but they may provide symptom relief from itchiness, and they can lubricate the perianal region to help with the passage of stool during a bowel movement. Many creams and ointments can be applied externally (perianal region) and internally (inside the anus and rectum). Some people prefer to wear a disposable glove when applying these creams and ointments. These gloves can be purchased at your local pharmacy. As with all medical products, it is important that you follow the product directions when using these types of creams and ointments. If you have questions about these products and how to use them, please speak with your healthcare team (e.g., doctor, nurse, nurse practitioner, or pharmacist).

Always seek medical advice for hemorrhoids that become painful (versus itching), bleed, or do not go away on their own after two weeks.

Prescription medications

Your healthcare provider may prescribe ointments and medications for constipation or to treat hemorrhoids or anal fissures. Speak with your pharmacist about the correct way to apply creams, ointments, and how to take medication.

Medication review

Some medications that you take for other medical conditions may cause constipation. Your healthcare provider may want to change your medications to ones that are less likely to cause constipation.



Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral

Most patients with perianal problems will not need a referral for surgery. The need to see a specialist is based on how long you've had the perianal problem, what you have tried to relieve your symptoms, what your healthcare provider sees and feels during your exam, and what may be causing perianal problems to occur.

If you and your healthcare provider believe you will benefit from surgery, you will be referred to see a general surgeon. When you see your general surgeon, they will review the procedure that they recommend for you and discuss any potential benefits and risks. Surgery for perianal problems is very effective for those who need it.



Helpful tools and resources

To learn about how to prepare for your specialist appointment, visit ahs.ca/qure.



Start your treatment & watch your symptoms

The time it takes to heal will be different for each person. Depending on the problem and the treatment option selected, you may be treated for up to six weeks. If you have not healed in six weeks, your healthcare provider may change treatments and see how you are after another six weeks. If your symptoms have still not improved, your healthcare provider may suggest a referral to a specialist for surgery.

Watch your symptoms. If you notice any of the following, go to the emergency department or call 911:

- Your bleeding is severe. If the bleeding is flowing or continuous, call 911 or go to the emergency department immediately.
- Your perianal pain is severe.
- You feel light-headed, especially with bleeding.

Call Health Link at 811, or call your healthcare provider if you notice any of the following:

- Bleeding: You may notice blood in the toilet or on toilet paper after a bowel movement or after wiping. If you see bleeding that is more than you would expect, contact your healthcare team.
- Signs of infection such as a fever or feeling generally unwell.
- Smelly discharge or frequent liquid bowel movements (diarrhea).

Watching your symptoms is important. Call your healthcare provider or Health Link at 811 if you have any concerns. You might feel like you don't want to bother your healthcare team, but no detail is too small to share. If it matters to you, it will matter to your healthcare team.

You can clarify with your healthcare team what to expect in terms of follow-up communication. Connect with your healthcare team whenever you:

- Have questions.
- Notice your symptoms getting worse.
- Have problems with your medicine.
- Haven't gotten test results or heard back about an appointment in the time you had agreed to.



Helpful tools and resources

If you can't reach your healthcare provider and need health advice or information, call Health Link anytime, day or night, by dialing **811**.





There are many different things that can impact your health and wellness. It is important to be able to work with your healthcare team to decide what is best for you, in your life, given your own unique circumstances as you manage perianal disease.

Remember, you don't need to do everything all at once. Take realistic and manageable steps in your health and wellness. Consider why making a change may benefit you and the things that matter to you. Remember, prevention steps like getting enough fibre and drinking lots of non-caffeinated and non-alcoholic fluids are important for improving and preventing perianal problems.



Helpful tools and resources

Find resources and services in your community:

211 helps Albertans find the right resource or service for whatever issue they need help with, at the right time. 211 is available anytime, day or night, by phone, text, and online chat. It is confidential and available in over 170 languages over the phone. To contact 211:

- Call 211
- Text INFO to 211
- Visit ab.211.ca

Workshops, classes, and services from the **Alberta Healthy Living Program** can help you to improve your health and quality of life with a chronic condition: ahs.ca/ahlp

Chronic Disease Management support: ahs.ca/cdm

Health Information & Tools: myhealth.alberta.ca/Pages/HealthInfoToolsDefault.aspx



Resources

There's lots of information out there, and it can be confusing to know what information is accurate and true. Here are some great resources that may be helpful for you.

- [MyHealth.Alberta.ca](https://myhealth.alberta.ca) - A great source for information. While at MyHealth Alberta, search for "Hemorrhoids" and/or "Anal Fissures".
- [Hemorrhoids: Care Instructions](#)

Get help now:

- Emergency: Call 911
- Health Link: Call 811

Mental health, addiction, and crisis support:

- [Addiction Helpline](#): 1-866-332-2322
- [Mental Health Helpline](#): 1-877-303-2642
- Crisis Text Line: Text CONNECT to 741741
- Crisis Services Canada: 988, or visit talksuicide.ca

Helpful tip

If you can't print this resource at home, ask a family member, friend, or your healthcare provider to print it for you. You can also use a computer and printer at your local library.

Community and social supports:

- Alberta 211: 211, or visit ab.211.ca
- Family Violence Info Line: 310-1818, or visit alberta.ca/family-violence-find-supports.aspx
- Income Support: 1-866-644-5135, or visit alberta.ca/income-support.aspx

Alberta Health Services programs:

- Home Care: ahs.ca/homecare
- Find a Dietitian: ahs.ca/nutrition
- Spiritual Care Services: ahs.ca/spiritualcare

Primary care (family doctors):

- Find a doctor: ahs.ca/findadoctor
- Virtual care guide: ahs.ca/virtualhealth

Patient concerns and feedback:

- Office of Alberta Health Advocates: alberta.ca/office-of-alberta-health-advocates.aspx
- Alberta Health Services Patient Relations: 1-855-550-2555, or visit ahs.ca/patientfeedback

Important phone numbers

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Notes

Use this space to take notes.

About this Pathway

The AHS Provincial Pathways Unit co- developed this patient pathway in partnership with patient and family advisors, primary and specialty care providers in Alberta. It is current as of **July 2024**.

Authors & Conflict of Interest Declaration

This pathway was reviewed and revised by a multi-disciplinary co-design team including general surgeons and primary care providers from across Alberta.

Pathway Review Process

Patient pathways undergo scheduled review every two years, or earlier if there is a clinically significant change in knowledge or practice. The next scheduled review is July 2026.

However, we welcome feedback at any time. Please send your [feedback here](#), or email us at albertapathways@ahs.ca.

Copyright Information

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International license. You are free to copy, distribute, and adapt the work for non-commercial purposes, as long as you attribute the work to Alberta Health Services and abide by the other license terms. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same, similar, or compatible license. The license does not apply to content for which the Alberta Health Services is not the copyright owner.

Disclaimer

This pathway represents evidence-based best practice but does not override the individual responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to their patients using their own clinical judgment given their patients' specific clinical conditions, in consultation with patients/alternate decision makers. The pathway is not a substitute for clinical judgment or advice of a qualified healthcare professional. It is expected that all users will seek advice of other appropriately qualified and regulated healthcare providers with any issues transcending their specific knowledge, scope of regulated practice or professional competence.