

Bowel stomas

4. Coping with a problem

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Achieving a degree of confidence with your stoma takes time, patience and often, as you have probably discovered, ingenuity. Consequently, if an 'accident' occurs or you recognise that something is not quite right with the stoma or the surrounding skin, alarm bells begin to ring. You may doubt your management skills and, as your anxiety levels rise, your confidence may drop. Here are some guidelines to assist you in trying to identify what may have gone wrong.

Leakage

Such an episode can be your worst nightmare realised! Therefore, it is vitally important that you find out the reason why it happened and how you can prevent the same thing occurring again. This kind of situation needs careful assessment. Here is a checklist you should ask yourself initially:

- Is the pouch defective?
Any hole, no matter how small, will allow content to leak out. Sometimes a filter can allow very thin liquid to seep through and mark your clothing.
- If you were wearing a drainable pouch – was the clip fastened securely?
- Did you let the pouch overflow?

If the answer to each of these questions is no, you should investigate further. Look at the back of the pouch/flange you have removed – there should be a track or area from the centre leading away to the point of leakage.

Now match the area of skin around your stoma with the track and look at it closely. You may find that the skin here is red – or even broken and sore (referred to as excoriated). The questions you need to ask yourself now are:

When does the leakage occur?

If the answer is at any time, or when you are enjoying a leisure activity such as gardening – where the constant bending may make the pouch/flange unstable – you may find that a small security belt would be useful.

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Have you found that the nature of the stoma output has changed?

A fair consistency can create problems by oozing beneath the backing. Seek advice from the stoma care nurse.

Are you changing your equipment efficiently enough?

Always ensure that the surrounding skin is clear of any debris and old adhesive, and dry it thoroughly.

Are you using any lotions or creams on skin around the stoma?

These will deter adhesion. Bathing lotion used for babies, for instance, can make their skin oily and often causes similar adhesion problems.

You may have found the solution by now; if not, consider the following:

Has effluent collected around the stoma rather than in the pouch?

This is commonly known as pancaking and is often the result of no air in the pouch, or the stool being 'too sticky'.

Have you found yourself losing or gaining weight over the past few weeks or so?

Either situation can alter your body contours, and can create new skin creases which act like 'rain gulleys', allowing content to leak away. An easy way to check if this is the case is to remove your equipment completely and sit in front of a mirror on an upright chair. Now look at your stoma closely – is it sitting proud on your abdomen or snug in a crease? (Refer to Figures 1 and 2, below.)

Sore skin

This is probably the most common problem ostomates experience and is usually a result of leakage. It is very important to determine the cause of the soreness before you try to deal with it. So ask yourself the following:



Figure 1. Retraction after weight gain



Figure 2. Skin showing creases



Figure 3. Skin showing allergic reaction

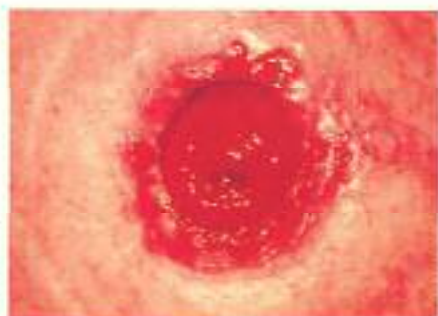


Figure 4. Using the wrong size pouch



Figure 5. Bleeding from rough cleaning



Figure 6. Prolapse needs medical advice

Are you removing the pouch/flange an excessive number of times?

Any more than three times in 24 hours will make the skin sore.

Does the soreness match the shape of the backing to the pouch/flange?

Excoriated skin matching the shape indicates an allergic reaction (Figure 3).

Does the area match any tracking to the back of the pouch/flange?

This is the result of leakage of content pooling behind.

Is the excoriated area very close to the stoma?

Check the size of your stoma (a measuring guide is usually provided in your equipment) and compare it to the size of the hole in your pouch/flange. Stomas can reduce in size by as much as 30% over the months following surgery (Figure 4). Adjust the size of the hole and the backing will quickly heal the area. Weight gain or loss can also influence the size of your stoma.

Bleeding from the stoma

This can be very frightening. However, be reassured that because the stoma has a very rich blood supply, some bleeding can occur from time to time.

Are you being overenthusiastic when you are cleaning your stoma, or are you using rough tissues?

A gentle wipe should suffice (Figure 5).

Are you currently undergoing a course of chemo- or radiotherapy?

These treatments cause the stoma to become very fragile (you may hear it referred to as friable), which can make it bleed quite readily. Apply some light pressure when any bleeding occurs.

Is the bleeding coming from the hole (lumen) of the stoma?

If this is the case, seek advice from your stoma care nurse.

Prolapse

This is more common in loop stomas and can be very distressing and difficult to manage. You may need to cut the aperture to your equipment larger to accommodate the prolapse.

Look out for a change of colour to the stoma. It may become dusky, or even dark. It may also affect your bowel function, causing you some abdominal pain. If any of these things happen, or you are otherwise concerned, seek medical advice (Figure 6).

Parastomal hernia

This is caused by muscle weakness around your stoma, which allows the area to bulge. Management may become difficult. The stoma can become larger and also hidden from view. You may need to use alternative equipment and adjust your technique. If it begins to affect your quality of life, medical advice should be sought – it may mean you need to consider the possibility of surgical repair.

If any problem with your stoma or skin persists for longer than a week, you should seek help from your stoma care nurse. He or she will not only be able to advise you on the best course of action, but also obtain the necessary items to help you.

If you wait too long before seeking help, then what began as a minor problem may well become a major issue and take much longer to resolve. Perhaps more importantly, your self-esteem and confidence can be very badly damaged in the process.

Key points

- Sore skin is probably the most common problem that ostomates experience. Although it is usually a result of leakage, it is very important to determine the cause of the soreness before you attempt to deal with it.
- Stomas can reduce in size by up to 30% in the months following surgery.
- Weight gain or loss can influence the size of your stoma.
- Because the stoma has a very rich blood supply, some bleeding can occur.
- If any problem lasts longer than a week, seek help from the stoma nurse.
- Don't wait too long before getting help; your confidence may be affected.