



Pilonidal Disease

What is pilonidal (pronounced pie-luh-NIE-dul) disease?

Pilonidal disease has been around since 1833! The word "pilonidal" means "hair nest."

Pilonidal disease is a chronic infection of the skin in the butt crease region. The condition occurs from a reaction to hairs rooted in the skin causing a "nest."

What causes pilonidal disease?

Pilonidal disease can happen in one of two ways.

- For some, pilonidal disease can happen when **a hair follicle in the buttock crease gets irritated and grows under the skin** (called an "ingrown" hair). That hair is then forced deeper into the skin by friction and pressure from things like:
 - ❖ tight clothing
 - ❖ sitting for a long time
 - ❖ activities hitting the butt area like horseback riding or bicycling
- The other way pilonidal disease happens is when **hair in the buttock crease comes loose and is thick enough that it can slowly poke all the way through the skin**. This makes a hole in the skin called a pore or a pit, and forms a nest of hair on the inside. Another name for the connection through the skin to the hair nest is the pilonidal sinus tract. Many people will have more than one tract.
- **About pilonidal abscesses:** The body treats the hair under the skin as a foreign body, like a splinter, and becomes inflamed around it. The tract may become infected and fill with pus. This is a pilonidal abscess. The abscess may:
 - ❖ Become painful, drain pus or blood
 - ❖ Cause a person to develop a fever
 - ❖ Cause the infected area to feel warm
 - ❖ Cause swelling of the infected area

Who gets pilonidal disease?

Pilonidal disease is common and can happen to anyone. It most often happens to teenagers. Boys are three to four times more likely to have pilonidal disease than girls are.

Some things that can increase the chance of getting pilonidal disease include:

- Having lots of body hair, especially really thick or coarse hair
- Being overweight
- Sitting for long periods of time
- Excessive sweating
- Family history of pilonidal disease

A person can still get pilonidal disease even if they do not have any of the above things.

Pilonidal Disease Treatments

There are a few different treatment options for pilonidal disease:

- **Antibiotics and hygiene:** Sometimes when a pilonidal abscess first shows up, the doctor treats it with antibiotics and suggests better hygiene, such as shaving and soaking/showering the infected area.
- **Drainage of abscess:** If the pilonidal abscess is not draining on its own, it may need to be drained in a doctor's office or emergency room. To drain the abscess, the doctor may:
 - ❖ Numb the area with local anesthesia
 - ❖ Make a small cut in the abscess to allow the pus to drain
 - ❖ Cover or pack the abscess with dressing or gauze
 - ❖ Give you instructions on how to care for the abscess at home

Pilonidal disease can come back. If your child has had one abscess, there is a 50:50 chance that the pilonidal disease may come back in the future.

Family Education Sheet • Pilonidal Disease

Home Care

Hair removal and hygiene are the two key things you **have** to do if you want pilonidal disease to go away - and improve chances of it not coming back.

Hair Removal

Hair is the cause of almost all pilonidal disease. Any type of hair can cause problems, but the most troublesome is coarse, thick hair. **Hair removal is the most important thing you can do for your pilonidal disease.**

- It is important to **cut the hair VERY short**
- **Make sure you remove ALL of the hair in the area around the butt crease.** Even one hair can keep the cut from healing or can make a new abscess show up. A family member will most likely need to help with hair removal.

How to remove hair:

- **Shaving:** You may need to do this every week, depending on how thick hair is and how fast it grows. To remove hair from the area, use regular razors, electric beard trimmers, or eyebrow shapers.
- **Chemical hair removal:** You may use Nair™ or other hair removal creams and gels to keep the hair away longer. Make sure to do not get the cream into the cut or on your anus.
- **Laser hair removal:** This works the best because it can make the hair go away for a long time or permanently. Boston Children's recommends this to most patients with pilonidal disease. Please talk with your surgeon about this.

Hygiene

You need to clean away all of the bacteria, debris, loose hairs and sweat on the skin of the buttock crease. You can do this by:

- **Soaking in a bath** for 10 to 15 minutes, two to three times a day
- **Spraying the buttock crease with a hand-held shower head** for 10 to 15 minutes, two to three times a day
- **Sitting in a Jacuzzi, pool or ocean** for 10 to 15 minutes, two to three times a day

Surgical Treatments

There are surgical treatments that may help pilonidal disease. Talk to your doctor to see what is right for you or your child.

- **Operation:** Some patients may need to have an operation to take care of their pilonidal disease. The surgery takes place under general anesthesia in the operating room. Your surgeon discusses the best surgical option for your child's situation. There are three general types of operations:

- ❖ **Remove the infection and close the cut:** The surgeon removes the pilonidal abscess, tracts and the infected fat and skin. He or she only leaves the healthy tissue behind, and closes the cut with stitches. This operation makes the pilonidal abscess go away the fastest, but there is a real chance that the abscess may come back after the operation.
- ❖ **Remove the infection and leave the cut open:** The surgeon removes the pilonidal abscess, tracts and the infected fat and skin, but keeps the skin of the cut open and filled with gauze. This allows the cut to heal from the inside out. This operation takes longer to heal than closing the cut, but makes it less likely for the abscess to come back later.
- ❖ **Flaps:** The surgeon removes the pilonidal abscess, tracts and the infected fat and skin. He or she uses healthy skin, fat, and muscles from another part of the buttocks to fill up the space where the abscess was. This can be a complicated operation, but is a good option in some people when other things have not worked well.

For More Information

For more information about pilonidal disease, visit the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons at

http://www.fascrs.org/patients/conditions/pilonidal_disease/.

A **Spanish** version of this education sheet is available from your provider.