

## Recommendations for Anal Dilatations Following Repair of Imperforate Anus Repair

In children born with an [imperforate anus](#), the anal canal, which would normally allow wastes to pass out of the body, fails to develop. When a young child has surgery to repair an imperforate anus, surgeons first determine the limits of the sphincter, a ring-like band of muscles that opens and closes the anus, and then accommodate the rectum and anus within the limits of the sphincter.

That means that sometimes for a little baby, the anus following surgery is smaller than normal for the child's age. In fact, in patients with good sphincters, the anus appears completely closed and it is not possible to see rectal mucosa, the lining of the rectum that produces mucus. The mucosa stays inside because the good muscle tone of the sphincter prevents the mucosa from coming out. If the patient is left in this condition, the anus would heal closed. [Anal dilations](#) are needed to gradually stretch the new anus without destroying the sphincter, until the anus reaches the size that is normal for the patient's age.

At the Colorectal Center at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, we prefer to dilate the anus twice a day because every dilatation creates small lacerations or tears and we want to keep the rectum open before those lacerations heal. We are opposed to doing dilatations once a week (under anesthesia to avoid pain) because that method lets the laceration heal for an entire week only to create a new laceration during the next dilatation. This leads to severe fibrosis (scarring) and a narrowing of the anus that becomes impossible to dilate.

### May Cause Discomfort, But Should Not Be Very Painful

Anal dilatations after a well done operation, in general should not be extremely painful. When the protocol for dilatation is followed properly, patients may experience uncomfortable dilatations but not real pain.

Severe pain can occur when the surgical procedure leaves that patient without adequate blood supply to the rectum, which therefore has a tendency to narrow. Pain can also occur when the protocol for dilatation is not followed properly and severe scarring develops in the anus, which is then subjected to further attempts at dilatation. If the anal dilatation stays at the same size for more than a week in one size, the anus will heal at that size and the large amount of scar tissue around the anus will make it impossible to dilate it further.

## Recommended Dilatation Protocol

The protocol used at the Colorectal Center is based on experience and the size of the anal opening in children with normally developing anuses. Parents or other caregivers are encouraged to do the dilatation procedure themselves at home, but if they have difficulty, the procedure can be done at the hospital.

Dilatation is done with a set of Hegar dilators of increasing size.

- A normal newborn will take a #12 Hegar dilator with minimal discomfort
- A child 4 to 12 months old will take a #13 Hegar dilator
- A child 8 to 12 months old will take a #14 dilator
- A child 1 to 3 years old will take a #15 Hegar dilator
- A child 3 to 12 years old will take a #16 Hegar dilator
- A child more than 12 years old will take a #17 Hegar dilator

## Major Improvements Over Previous Procedures

An operation to repair an imperforate anus should be done as early as possible since very little babies seem to tolerate dilatations better. The current surgical and dilatation procedures represent significant improvements over methods formerly used to repair an imperforate anus.

In years past, surgeons tended to create very large anal openings. The main goals of those operations were to avoid subjecting children to anal dilatations and possibly strictures, narrowing of the opening from improper dilatations. While these goals may have been worthy, those operations did not respect the limits of the sphincter mechanism. The newer surgical procedures and dilatation protocol do respect the limits of the sphincter mechanism, with better overall results.

## Contact the Colorectal Center at Cincinnati Children's

For more information or to request an appointment for the Colorectal Center at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, please [contact us](#).