

# Diagnosis, Symptoms and Treatment: Understanding Fistulas

**Corey Greenblatt** 00:04

Welcome to Audio Guide One: A Patient's Guide to Understanding Complex Perianal Fistula. This guide is produced by the Global Healthy Living Foundation and made possible with support from Takeda and Bristol Myers Squibb. I'm Corey Greenblatt, Senior Manager of Policy and Advocacy for the Global Healthy Living Foundation. And today we'll learn more about the diagnosis, symptoms and treatment of fistulas. Whether you or someone you know has a fistula, or even if you think you might, these audio guides are designed to help you make sense of symptoms and get the care you need. Accurate information will help you work together with your health care professionals to hopefully have fewer and less severe symptoms. Please remember that fistula is a medical issue, and always talk to your healthcare team if you have symptoms that bother or worry you. In this audio guide, we'll talk about all you need to know about fistula if you have Crohn's disease, we'll explore the importance of seeking care what symptoms to watch for, and how to get diagnosed with the fistula and the available treatment options.

01:02

Let's start with the basics. You may be wondering, what is a fistula? Fistula is an abnormal connection between two different areas of the body. Anyone can develop a fistula but these tunnels are most common among people with Crohn's disease. Crohn's is a type of inflammatory bowel disease that causes chronic inflammation in the digestive tract. In fact, about 25% of Crohn's disease patients develop perianal fistulas, which is when an ulcer pushes through the lining of the intestine into the perianal area. Perianal fistulas are considered complex if they involve a certain amount of sphincter muscle, branch off in more than one direction, impact the rectum or the vagina, or get infected. Fistula symptoms include pain, swelling, and discharge of blood, stool, or pus. If you think you have a fistula you should see your gastroenterologist right away. A gastroenterologist is a specialist with expertise in digestive diseases. You may also need to see a colorectal surgeon in order to drain the fistula. Finding a team that works with you and takes your needs, wants and lifestyle into account is extremely important. You should feel seen and heard by your healthcare team and like you are a part of the discussions and choices made around your care. So, what happens at a doctor's visit to assess if you have a fistula? Your provider will ask you about your health history and your symptoms and may also do a physical exam to look at the area. In this exam, they will see if there are any signs of an external opening that shouldn't be there and look for an abscess, the pus-filled sac that occurs with infections. While this exam may feel uncomfortable and embarrassing, try to remember that gastroenterologists and colorectal surgeons do this work all the time, and that ultimately this will help you take control of your health and feel better. During your appointment it's important to speak up and get the answers to many of the questions you have. With these answers, you can make more informed decisions about your care with your doctor. Some questions you can ask are do I need surgery? Will biologic drugs help? What is the likelihood that my treatment will be successful? When should I follow up and see you again? How can I get more support? If you do get diagnosed with a fistula, the next conversation you'll have to have is about treatment. When choosing a type of treatment, it can be helpful for you to focus on your goals. What do you as the patient want to get out of treatment or surgery? It may be helpful to

ask your healthcare team to explain what can happen in the best and worst cases for each type of treatment or surgery they suggest. Knowing these answers, you can then compare treatments and decide together on what is best for you. If there is an infection, you may require antibiotics, and if the fistula hasn't already burst, it will likely need to be drained by a surgeon. You might also need surgery to remove the fistula and or biologic medication to treat the underlying inflammation. If you need surgery, before the procedure, most patients have imaging studies to show where the fistula opens and closes. Choosing which type of surgery to have depends on where the fistula is located, if it's infected, and both the patient's and the surgeon's preference.

In the meantime, there are a few things you can do at home to help relieve your symptoms like a sitz bath. If you have drainage, you can use period pads, cotton gauze, or even a few layers of toilet paper to line your underwear and keep the area dry. But remember that you need to see a doctor to treat the underlying problem. While there are no quick fixes when it comes to inflammatory bowel disease or fistula, know that there are health professionals and a community out there ready to support you.

**Corey Greenblatt** 04:32

Thank you for listening today to our audio guide on fistulas and Crohn's disease. I'm Corey Greenblatt, Senior Manager, Policy and Advocacy for the Global Healthy Living Foundation. For more information about managing Crohn's disease official symptoms, take a look at the show notes or visit [ghlf.org](http://ghlf.org)