

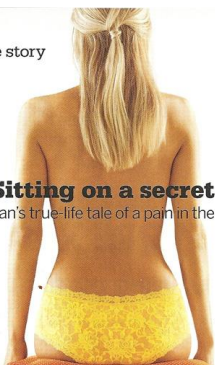
Sitting on a secret

One woman's true-life tale of a pain in the derriere

When I was seven months pregnant with baby number two, my husband suggested that we name him Chester. Not the baby—my hemorrhoid. Most people can't even say the word without cringing, yet I was lucky enough to have a hemorrhoid (here, I said it again) so large it was worthy of a name. Sure, I can laugh about Chester now, but during that torturous summer it was no laughing matter.

It all began with an innocent bout of constipation. Between the notoriously bowel-blocking prenatal vitamins I gulped with orange soda, the meals of low-fiber Pringles and rice pudding (what can I say? I had cravings) and the pressure of my growing belly, a slowdown was inevitable. I pushed and strained for two weeks, and then one day I felt it: a sensitive bean-sized lump between my very tender cheeks.

Self-diagnosis: "It's a tumor!" I called my mom immediately. "You're pregnant, honey. It's only a hemorrhoid," she said, laughing. "Don't worry; you can just push it back in."



"Push it in? Not in this lifetime." I don't know why I was surprised. After all, the signs were obvious: My diet was terrible, I was constipated, and when I did poop, my butt burned. Mom said not to worry, so I didn't. I went online instead.

I learned that hemorrhoids are bundles of blood vessels in our rear, and we all have them. However, they can develop into little balls of fire when you strain a lot, the pressure causes blood to rush to the area, inflaming the veins. Pregnancy can trigger swelling, too, thanks to the extra weight of the fetus. I also discovered that some hemorrhoids hide inside the rectum, and others, like Chester, poke out. Besides feeling the burn, many people also spot blood on their toilet paper or in the bowl, though I didn't. Here's the part I really latched onto: Usually they go away without any major intervention.

Except that mine didn't. Sometime in the two weeks that followed, I became absolutely terrified to take care of business. Maybe that was because each small push felt as if someone were zapping my behind with a taser. After

huffing and puffing through every half-hour session, I emerged from the bathroom exhausted and teary-eyed. I was banking so hard on the hemorrhoid retreating on its own that I still hadn't bothered to try any remedies or call my doctor. But I needed help, so I let my husband in on my secret. His response: "So you've got a hemorrhoid—no biggie." *Au contraire, pal.* By now, the teeny tiny bean had plumped into a big, fat cherry. And, oh, was it ripe.

There was nothing small about it. I suddenly realized that the only way to make my husband understand was to show him. As I got into position, it struck me that he might never have sex with me again, but it was a risk I had to take. "Oh, My God," he whispered through his hands. He hugged me, said he was so sorry and officially named the cherry Chester. He also had some bad news. There were in fact three hemorrhoids—one big, two little. Yep, Chester had a posse.

After the big revealing, my husband headed to the drugstore for an arsenal of over-the-counter treatments. I tried everything: maximum-strength Preparation H, Tucks Pads With Witch Hazel and any other cream or pad that promised relief. These products should have at least eased the burning and swelling, but after a week I only felt worse. My husband kept telling me to call my ob/gyn. But what was I going to say? Honestly, I had a problem involving my anus, for God's sake. Not to mention that the idea of having to spread my cheeks to a stranger, even a doctor, was beyond mortifying. Yes, I'd already been through labor once and had my share of vaginal exposure. This particular orifice, however, was off-limits to outsiders.

That is, until I had my regular checkup about a week later. I needed relief, and I needed it yesterday. My ob/gyn wasn't fazed. She gave me a prescription for a cortisone suppository to bring down the swelling and suggested I try Colace, an over-the-counter stool softener, as well as warm sitz baths. I soaked those bad boys three or four times a day, took the Colace and painfully inserted the suppositories for 10 days. I even started drinking tons of water and eating broccoli. Nothing worked.

The constant pain, which had now risen to the level of firecracker-exploding-in-underwear, was inescapable. I could no longer walk normally. (I shuffled on my tiptoes instead.) I couldn't sit without my doughnut pillow. I couldn't sleep. And I certainly couldn't keep up with my 1-year-old son.

It wasn't until Chester started to bleed, however, that I officially declared defeat. I was worried about my baby, and the next morning, I called my ob/gyn's office in hysterics. She wasn't there, so the nurse told me to go straight to the emergency room. When I arrived, they sent me up to the maternity floor, where a doctor and his crew of medical interns checked on the baby (she was fine) and gave me a full rectal exam. "Yep, you have a hemorrhoid all right," one of them said. Thanks for the news flash, Doogie. Now tell me something I don't know.

The nightmare continued when a nurse asked if she could take a peek—she'd never seen a hemorrhoid before. At this point, I would have shown it to the janitor if he helped. One look, and she shrieked *en español*. I don't speak Spanish, but from the few courses I took in college, I believe she asked the dear Lord to have mercy on my poor soul. When the show was over, the doctor sent me home with a prescription for a superstrength numbing cream that wasn't that super or numbing.

My obstetrician called later to refer me to a specialist, which is how I found myself eight months pregnant in the waiting room of a colorectal surgeon, thinking the words *rectal* and *surgery* should never be in the same sentence. The soft-spoken doctor gently asked me to lie on my left side as he flipped on an unforgiving spotlight. He explained that I had an external hemorrhoid that had thrombosed (meaning a blood clot had formed inside it), and the clot was stretching the supersensitive skin around my recter region. The only way to relieve the pain would be to remove the clot right away. Then we have to wait and see if Chester disappeared after the delivery.

When I saw the doctor walk toward me with the syringe full of anesthesia, the room started spinning. He gave me permission to scream until the drug worked, which I exercised freely. Still, even after the medication kicked in, I trembled from head to toe, and a petite nurse crouched over me to keep my cheeks wide open and steady. The surgeon made a small snip and suctioned out the clot. After the 10-minute procedure, I was so traumatized, I couldn't speak. I just staved and nodded as he explained that the pain and bleeding would continue for a few more days. To make matters worse, he couldn't prescribe the usual pain medication because I was pregnant. I hobbled out with my bleeding behind stuffed with gauze.

When I returned home, I used Hubble Space Telescope technology to survey the damage (actually it was two Revlon compact mirrors). I asked my husband for a sympathy look-see because the anesthesia was wearing off, a burning pain was firing up and the bleeding was more than I expected. Plus, the unthinkable was nearing: the urge to go. My husband held my hand and walked me toward the bathroom. I became pale and clammy. My legs shook. I locked the door and buried my face in my hands to quiet my crying. Finally, after half an hour, I mustered the courage to give one good, but utterly excruciating, push.

I didn't know it yet, but the worst was finally over. I improved every day, and by the end of the week I was pain-free. As expected, the hemorrhoids hung around until after I recovered from my delivery, but they caused no more agony. Since then, I have answered many a call from friends looking for hush-hush tush advice, becoming a sort of Dear Abby for the derriere. Chester has twice threatened to return, and as soon as I feel him starting to surface, I begin downing water and eating more veggies. The poop show is over, and there won't be an encore. ■

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