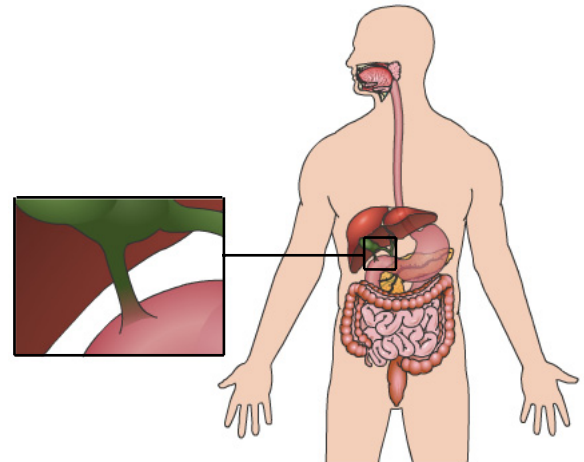


## Introduction

A fistula is an abnormal connection between two parts of the body that do not normally connect. Fistulas may develop between different organs and/or between internal organs and the outside of the body. They can also develop between blood vessels. Some people are born with a fistula. But fistulas are most often caused by an injury or surgery. Inflammation caused by disease and certain types of infections also may cause fistulas.



Fistula

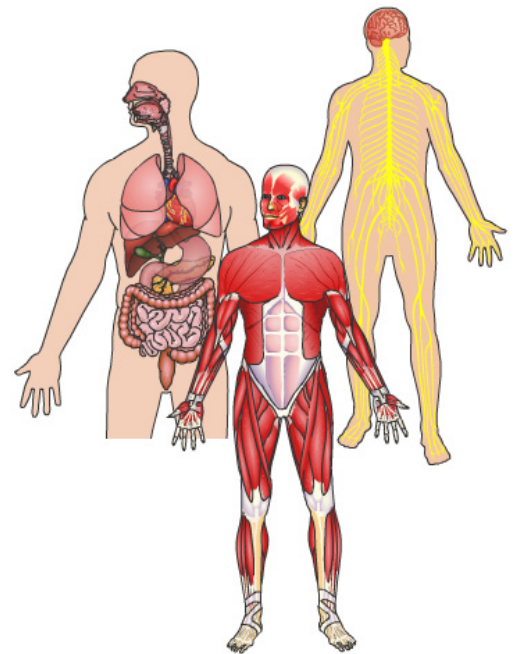
This reference summary will help you understand how fistulas are diagnosed and treated. It includes information about the different types of fistulas and common symptoms of fistulas.

## Types of Fistulas

Fistulas can affect any area in which connections are made between two or more parts of the body.

Fistulas may affect organs and blood vessels in the:

- Brain and nervous system.
- Circulatory system.
- Respiratory system.
- Digestive system.
- Muscular system, skeletal system and connective tissue.
- Urogenital system.



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The different types of fistulas include:

- Blind, with only one open end.
- Complete, with both external and internal openings.
- Incomplete, which is a fistula with an opening on the skin that doesn't connect to an organ inside of the body. It is like a deep hole into the body.

Although most fistulas are in the form of a tube, some can have multiple branches.

## Symptoms

A fistula can cause different symptoms depending on the severity and location of the fistula. For example, a fistula in the lungs may cause a person to cough up blood or have trouble breathing. A fistula between different blood vessels in the brain may cause dizziness, strokes or mental problems.

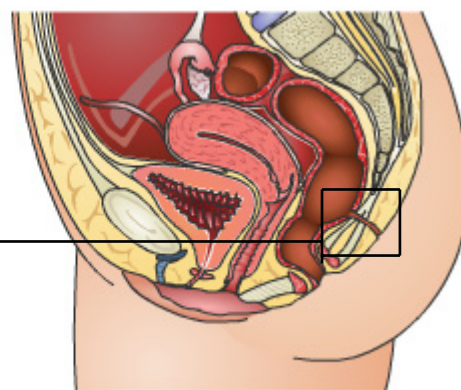
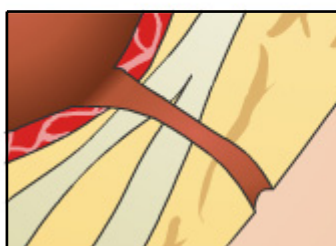
In general, fistulas that connect to the surface of the skin may cause the following symptoms:

- Pain.
- Fever.
- Tenderness.
- Itching.
- Generally feeling poorly.



Fistulas may also drain pus or a foul-smelling discharge. For example, a fistula that forms between the bowel and the surface of the skin may leak feces, or poop. A fistula that forms between the bladder and the surface of the skin may leak urine.

Fistulas may lower a person's quality of life. A fistula that leaks a foul smelling discharge may be embarrassing in social situations. This could lead to depression and other mental health problems.



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## Causes

A fistula may develop for different reasons.

Some people are born with a fistula. But fistulas are most often caused by an injury or surgery.

Common causes of fistula include:

- Diseases, such as inflammatory bowel disease and Crohn's disease.
- Medical treatment, such as complications from gallbladder surgery or radiation therapy.
- Injury or trauma, such as head trauma or a slow or difficult child birth.



## Diagnosis

Your health care provider will first ask about your symptoms and medical history. A physical exam will be performed. This is done to check for signs of disease.

Many tests are available to help diagnose fistulas. The tests you have depend on the location of your fistula. If the location is not obvious, your symptoms may help your health care provider determine the location.

Some of the tests often used during diagnosis include:

- Barium enema.
- Colonoscopy.
- Sigmoidoscopy.
- Upper endoscopy.

A barium enema is a type of X-ray. A solution of barium sulfate is put into the body through the anus to outline the lining of the rectum and colon. Barium sulfate is a chalky chemical that shows up as white on X-ray film.



A colonoscopy is an examination of the inside of the colon using a thin, tube-like instrument with a light and a lens for viewing. This instrument may also have a tool to remove tissue to be checked under a microscope for signs of disease.

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A sigmoidoscopy is an examination of the lower colon using a thin, tube-like instrument with a light and a lens for viewing. It may also have a tool to remove tissue to be checked under a microscope for signs of disease.

An upper endoscopy is an examination of the esophagus, stomach and duodenum using an endoscope. An endoscope is a thin, tube-like instrument with a light and lens for viewing.

Other tests use a special kind of dye for diagnosis. The dye may be injected into the fistula before X-rays are taken. The dye helps show the fistula better on an X-ray. For some types of fistulas, the dye may be injected into a vein.

## Treatment

Fistulas may be treated in a number of different ways. Treatment depends on the location and severity of symptoms. Fistulas sometimes close on their own. Some fistulas may be treated with medication.



Fistulas affecting the digestive system may be treated with a special diet. Fistulas that don't respond to other treatments may require surgery. Sometimes medications and surgery are used together to treat certain types of fistulas.

## Summary

A fistula is an abnormal connection between two parts inside of the body. Fistulas may develop between different organs. They can also develop between vessels in the body, such as an artery and a vein.

Some people are born with a fistula. Other common causes of fistulas include bodily injury, infection, certain diseases and complications from surgery.

Your health care provider can diagnose a fistula using a number of different tests. Often, a contrast material or dye is injected into the body and X-rays are taken. This may help show the fistula and the parts of the body affected by it.



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Treatment depends on the cause of the fistula, where it is and how bad it is. Some fistulas will close on their own. In some cases, you may need medication or surgery, or both medication and surgery. A special diet may be used to treat fistulas that affect the digestive system.

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