

Proctalgia Fugax: Sudden rectal pain - What is the cause?



Do you experience sudden, intense cramps in the rectum that disappear as quickly as they arrived? You are not alone. Many people suffer from **proctalgia fugax**, a condition characterised by acute rectal pain, which often occurs at night or while at rest.

Although the pain can be frightening, the condition is usually harmless. But when should you consider a **bowel examination** to rule out other causes? In this post, we take a closer look at symptoms, causes, and evidence-based treatment.

What is proctalgia fugax?

Proctalgia fugax is defined as brief episodes of severe pain in the rectal area (anorectal). The pain is likely caused by spasms in the anal sphincter or the pelvic floor muscles.

Typical symptoms:

- **Sudden intensity:** The pain starts without warning.
 - **Short duration:** Episodes typically last from a few seconds up to 30 minutes.
 - **Nocturnal attacks:** It is very common to wake up due to the pain.
 - **Painless intervals:** Between attacks, there are no symptoms.
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When is a bowel examination necessary?

Although the condition itself is benign, it is important to rule out underlying diseases if your **rectal pain** changes character. A doctor will often assess whether there is a need for an endoscopic examination ([sigmoidoscopy](#) or [colonoscopy](#)).

You should seek medical advice for a bowel examination if you experience:

1. Blood in the stool.
 2. Unexplained weight loss.
 3. Changed bowel habits over a prolonged period.
 4. Pain that does not disappear quickly (constant pain).
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Causes and risk factors

The precise cause of proctalgia fugax is still unknown, but research points to dysfunction in the internal anal sphincter. Stress and anxiety have also been shown to trigger or worsen the frequency of attacks.

Did you know? Studies suggest that proctalgia fugax affects between 8% and 18% of the population at some point in their lives, but many never seek medical attention.

Treatment options: What does the science say?

As the attacks are short-lived, medication rarely has time to work before the pain is gone. However, there are preventive and acute strategies:

- **Relaxation:** Warm baths or pelvic floor exercises can help loosen the cramp.
 - **Topical treatment:** Ointments containing nitroglycerin or calcium channel blockers can, in some cases, reduce the pressure in the sphincter.
 - **Inhaled salbutamol:** Some studies have shown that asthma medication (salbutamol) can shorten the duration of the pain.
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Scientific references (PubMed)

To ensure the highest professional validity, here are the sources used for this article:

1. **Takano M.** *Proctalgia fugax: caused by abnormal forcing of the levator ani muscle.* J Anus Rectum Colon. 2017. [PMID: 31768393](#)
2. **Jeyarajah S, et al.** *Proctalgia fugax, an evidence-based management algorithm.* Z Gastroenterol. 2010. [PMID: 20641041](#)
3. **Grimes WR, Stratton M.** *Proctalgia Fugax.* StatPearls [Internet]. 2023. [PMID: 28846324](#)