Q: What can I do about chronic hemorrhoids?
—Dale P., Los Angeles

A: This common problem must be approached with techniques for rapid relief, but a longer view toward preventing future recurrences is also highly recommended. Hemorrhoids are varicosities, or ballooning, of some of the veins in the rectal area. They can protrude in grape-like clusters beyond the anus, and be quite tender, especially with prolonged sitting. These are called external hemorrhoids and are quite easy to remove with minor surgery, which often ends up being the best bet in terms of rapid and permanent relief. Internal hemorrhoids don’t necessarily protrude beyond the anal sphincter, but they can be uncomfortable and bleed with passing of stool. These are trickier to remove surgically. For quick relief, a small ice cube can be placed into the rectum to slightly numb the area and soothe the inflammation.

Other natural tonics that are often useful include topical witch hazel (the main ingredient in Tucks and Preparation H) and supplements of stone root, horse chestnut, butcher’s broom, and ginkgo—all taken orally. The herbs can be taken together or one at a time: use about 250 milligrams each herb.

Blueberries may also help: eat about ½ cup of blueberries daily. Frozen blueberries are fine because the freezing actually ruptures the cell walls of the berries and renders the toning (i.e., vein-shrinking) pigments more bioavailable.

It is useful to find the cause of your hemorrhoids. This pesky problem is quite common in women during pregnancy because there is so much more blood volume and pressure on the venous system. Varicosities in the legs commonly arise during pregnancy as well. If there is no obvious reason (such as a job with prolonged standing, especially on a concrete floor, or rapid weight gain) for developing hemorrhoids, please check your liver function. All the venous blood, which goes uphill back to the heart after delivering oxygen to the tissues, must pass through the liver before reaching the pump. Any kind of liver congestion will slow the returning blood, backlogging the system, and causing veins to balloon under the extra pressure.

The first order of business in restoring liver health is to avoid all drugs, alcohol, and coffee. Liver-cleansing basics include using castor oil packs and emphasizing liver-friendly supplements (such as milk thistle) and foods (such as beets and artichokes) daily. Please see dremilykane.com for more information on treating hemorrhoids and liver ailments.

Q: I have rectal fissures, which are quite painful. Nothing helps. Is something wrong with my diet?
—Cara T., Denver

A: Yes. These paper-cut-thin lesions in the rectal tissue may be because the skin integrity is being compromised by a waste product from your diet. My top suspects, in order of likeliness, are wheat-based ingredients, dairy products, corn-based ingredients—especially high-fructose corn syrup—eggs, and soy products, especially nonfermented types such as soymilk and soy fillers in packaged foods. If you eat these foods daily, try a two- to six-week elimination diet. If the fissures heal, slowly reintroduce the foods one at a time, taking at least three days before adding another of the possible problem foods. Don’t reintroduce these foods more rapidly than every three to five days because your body may take up to 72 hours to react, especially if your digestive system is on the slow side.

Sitz baths, simply bathing for 10 to 20 minutes in nice warm water at least up to your hips, daily for several weeks can be very effective. If your rectal area tends to be damp, a gentle blow dry with a hair dryer after bathing can help. If your tissues tend to be dry, however, moisturizing will work better to promote healing. The topical combination of calendula and comfrey cream, applied twice daily, is very healing. Some find Liesitin works well (zinc oxide plus vitamin D paste), and aloe gel is very soothing.

A third common complaint is itchiness, or anal pruritus. Sometimes the itching can be intense. The following, when consumed in sufficient quantities, can trigger this condition: colas, black tea, coffee, beer, chocolate, and tomatoes.