

Case 12 Recurrent abscesses over the sacrum

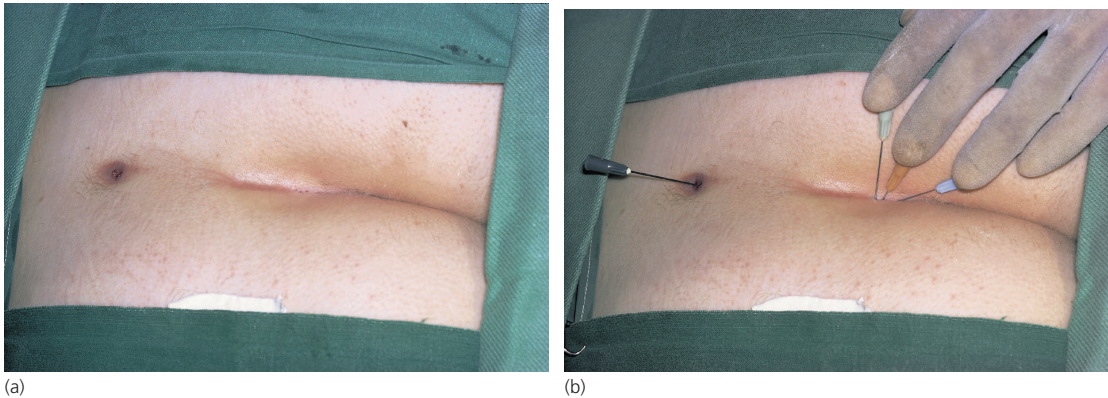


Figure 12.1

A 25-year-old, rather overweight, male office worker was referred to the surgical outpatient clinic with a history of recurrent abscesses 'at the lower end of the spine'. He was admitted for surgery. Figure 12.1a shows the appearance of his sacral region as he lay anaesthetized on the operating table with his buttocks strapped apart. In Fig. 12.1b, probes have been placed into three small orifices just above the anal verge and into a larger, higher opening, which is at the site of the previous recurrent abscesses.

What is the diagnosis?

This can only be a group of pilonidal sinuses with an associated recurrent abscess.

What does the term pilonidal mean?

It comes from the Latin *pilus* meaning hair and *nidus* meaning a nest – a nest of hair.

Define the term sinus

A sinus is a blind track that leads to an epithelial surface.

What is the aetiology of this condition?

It is believed that hairs shed from the head and trunk collect in the natal cleft (which is deeper in obese subjects). Movement of the buttocks against each other, especially in the sitting position, produce a negative pressure that allows these hairs to implant into the hair follicles. Here they set up a foreign body reaction, which leads to abscess formation. The pus tracks either proximally, as in this case, or to one or other side of the natal cleft. The abscess discharges spontaneously or is drained surgically, but repeated episodes of infection will occur unless the underlying cause is removed.

This aetiology explains how pilonidal sinuses can occur at other sites. Barbers commonly develop them in the interdigital clefts of the fingers, as demonstrated in Fig. 12.2. In these cases the hair comes from the customer and not from the patient! Similarly they have been described between the toes of abattoir workers; here animal hair is implicated. They also occur in the axilla, umbilicus and in the folds of amputation stumps that have redundant skin.



Figure 12.2 Pilonidal sinus between the fingers of a men's barber.

What are the principles of treating this condition?

- If there is an abscess, this must first be drained.
- Once this is resolved, surgery is performed to remove the underlying sinus tracks.
- Subsequently the patient is advised to keep the natal area meticulously free of hair.