

Constipation

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What is it?

Constipation is when you have infrequent bowel movements and your stools are hard and dry, making them so difficult to pass that you have to strain. Or you may feel like you still need to have a bowel movement even after you've had one.

Not everyone has bowel movements once a day. A normal range is three times a day to three times a week. You may be constipated if you have bowel movements much less often than normal. However, if your stools are soft and pass easily, you are not constipated.

What causes it?

As the food you eat passes through your digestive tract, your body takes nutrients and water from the food. This process creates stool which is moved through your intestines with muscle contractions called *peristalsis*. If too much water is absorbed because the stool moves too slowly through the *colon* (large intestine) then the stool can be hard and dry which leads to constipation.

A number of things can affect this process. These include not drinking enough fluids, not eating enough fiber, not being active enough, taking certain drugs, not going to the bathroom when you have the urge to have a bowel movement and regularly over-using laxatives. Any of these things can cause the stools to move more slowly through your intestines, leading to constipation.

Constipation can also happen because of illness like depression, thyroid disease, diabetes, kidney disease, irritable bowel syndrome and colon cancer. The medicines which can cause constipation are iron or calcium supplements, bismuth, antihistamines, diuretics, narcotics, and some blood pressure medicines.

Who gets it?

Constipation can begin at any age and can persist for life or resolve after a fairly brief period of time. Severity of the problem can also be quite variable with some people having only mild difficulties while others have more severe difficulty.

In children constipation is usually associated with changes in normal routine, such as the introduction of

whole milk, toilet training, travel, or other stressful events. It is most common at two to four years of age.

Constipation is also very common in people over the age of 65, probably due to decreased muscular activity of the intestines, increased medication use, and physical problems making stooling more difficult. It is also more common in women, rural areas, cold climates, and low socioeconomic conditions.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of constipation can include a feeling of fullness or pressure in the rectum, bloating and gas, nausea, abdominal pain and cramping, or feeling the urge but being unable to pass stool. It is also important to recognize the warning symptoms of more possibly serious bowel disease.

Warning symptoms of more serious disease

- Bleeding from the rectum
- Abdominal pain with severe cramping
- High fever and/or weight loss
- Prolonged nausea and vomiting

How do you prevent it?

There are some general guidelines that apply to both children and adults in preventing constipation.

Be sure to drink enough fluids, especially water. You should try to drink 6 to 8 glasses of water a day. However, fluids alone will not promote normal bowel function because the small intestine can absorb all of this fluid. A high fluid intake without a high dietary fiber and bulk intake will only result in increased urination.

Thus, you must eat foods that are high in fiber, like whole-grain bread, high-fiber cereals, vegetables like beans, broccoli, peas and lentils, and fruits including prunes and prune juice, apricots, and figs. Dietary fiber is undigested plant residue that passes almost intact through the digestive system. It adds bulk and holds water to soften the stool. Experts suggest eating between 20 and 35 grams of fiber daily. Most Americans average only 10 to 15 grams a day. To add

more fiber to your diet, you can mix 1 or 2 tablespoons of wheat bran (each tbsp contains about 2 grams of fiber) or ground flaxseed into your cereal, casseroles, or cake or brownie mixes. You may notice some bloating, gas or cramping at first, especially if you start with taking too much bran or increase the amount you're using too quickly. These symptoms should go away in a 2-3 weeks. Do not give up if success is not immediate.

Also, getting more exercise helps prevent constipation. Start with walking, bicycling, or swimming. Being active promotes regularity.

Tips on preventing constipation

- Drink plenty of fluids – at least 8 glasses a day.
- Eat more dietary fiber.
- Don't skip meals, especially breakfast.
- Set aside time to have a bowel movement. A good time may be after breakfast.
- Don't resist the urge to have a bowel movement
- Exercise daily.
- Don't take laxatives except as directed.

Can it be treated?

The goal of treatment is to reestablish normal bowel habits without the long term use of laxatives or enemas. Treatment should reduce symptoms and prevent complications. Continuous use of laxatives should be avoided because they can cause the colon to stretch and weaken. Laxatives should not be used except as directed by your doctor. Enemas usually aren't needed unless impacted stool needs to be removed.

- **Commercial bulk agents** provide natural or synthetic fiber which softens the stool, increases the bulk and makes the stool easier to pass. They include bran, psyllium (Metamucil, Fiberall, Perdiem, Serutan), polycarbophil (Fibercon) and methylcellulose (Citrucel).

You must use bulk agents daily for them to work. Start slowly and drink plenty of fluids. They may not help for several days to a week or more. To give your system time to adjust, gradually increase how much you use every 3 to 5 days until you get the effect you want. You can help bulk agents taste better by mixing them with fruit juice or fluids other than water.

- **Magnesium laxatives** are safe, effective, inexpensive, and have rapid onset. They also appear to hold more water in the bowels, but they must be used with some caution in persons with kidney disease. If there has been no bowel movement in more than 2 days, take 1-2 tbsp Milk of Magnesia at bedtime.

- **Osmotic laxatives** (lactulose, sorbitol, Miralax) work in children and adults by holding more fluid in the intestine and softening the stool. Prune, apple, pear juice, and corn syrup have natural sugars like sorbitol. Side effects can include bloating, cramping, and gas.

- **Stool softeners** (docusate) are available over the counter without a prescription. These agents work by allowing the mixing of water and fat in the stool. They are worth a try if you are having hard stools, but in many people they are of marginal benefit.

- **Suppositories** (glycerin, bisacodyl) may be used during the retraining period to stimulate the urge to have a bowel movement. Glycerin suppositories inserted into the rectum provide a mild irritant to help pass the stool. You should gradually decrease this practice until you no longer need it.

- **Enemas** (tap water, saline, Fleets) can be helpful for fecal impaction. They can be used on occasion but should not be used regularly.

- **Lubricating laxatives** like mineral oil should be used only when your doctor recommends them, such as if you've just had surgery and shouldn't strain to have a bowel movement. Overuse of mineral oil can cause vitamin deficiencies and anal leakage.

- **Stimulant laxatives** (Senna, cascara, rhubarb, bisacodyl) irritate the lining of the colon and trigger it to contract initially. However, with repeated use they become less effective and constipation actually worsens, a condition known as *laxative abuse syndrome*. Therefore they should generally be avoided.

Are there complications?

Chronic constipation may be a complicating factor in other conditions, including hemorrhoids (from straining) and diverticular disease (from the increased pressure it takes to move the stool through the colon). Other possibilities are hernias from excessive straining, uterine or rectal prolapse, and bowel obstruction. While troublesome, constipation is usually not serious.

There are several potential problems with laxative use. Laxatives can cause you intestines to become lazy and not work as well, which can make you even more constipated when you stop using them. They can also interfere with absorption of nutrients and medications, and they can lead to dehydration by not allowing to colon time to absorb water from the stool.

In summary

- Prevent constipation primarily by drinking more fluids and eating a diet high in fiber.
- Increased physical activity is also important in preventing constipation.