

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation is having infrequent or difficult bowel movements. It may also involve having to strain or push to have a bowel movement.

People are constipated when their pattern of bowel movement changes and they have trouble having a bowel movement.

Since each person's pattern is different, it is hard to describe constipation one way.

What causes constipation?

There are many causes of constipation, which include:

- staying in bed; not moving around or doing your normal activity
- taking some medications such as codeine
- a change in food, fluid and your normal diet due to surgery or illness
- being in a strange place, often with no privacy
- anxiety related to being in the hospital or having medical tests

How do I prevent constipation?

There are 3 things that you can do to prevent constipation:

1. Drink fluids

A soft stool contains lots of water and is easy to pass without straining. Drinking plenty of fluids is important to have a soft stool. Drink 6 to 8 cups (1.5 litres) of fluids a day when increasing your fibre intake.



Some people cannot drink a lot of fluids due to medical conditions such as heart or kidney disease.

If you are not allowed to drink a lot of fluids, talk to your health care provider. He or she can help you find a way to prevent constipation that is safe for you.

2. Exercise

Exercise and activity helps keep your bowels moving. Aim for at least 30 minutes a day.



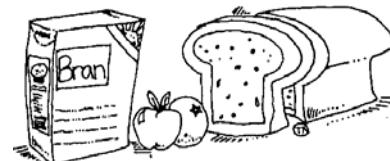
Walking is a good way to increase activity. If you have questions about a certain exercise, talk to your health care provider or ask to see a physiotherapist.

3. Eat fibre

Adding fibre to your diet is a good way to prevent or treat constipation. Eat a high fibre diet with lots of vegetables and fruit, legumes and whole grain breads and cereals.

Before you increase your fibre ...

Your body will need to adjust to more fibre in your diet. Increasing fibre too quickly or without drinking enough liquids may cause gas, bloating, cramping, diarrhea or constipation.



1. Add fibre-rich foods slowly to your diet. For example, add one new high fibre food each day for one week.
2. Drink 6 to 8 cups (1.5 litres) of fluids a day when increasing your fibre intake.

Some people cannot drink a lot of fluids due to medical conditions such as heart or kidney disease.

If you are not allowed to drink a lot of fluids, talk to your health care provider. He or she can help you find a way to prevent constipation that is safe for you.



If you want more information about fibre, ask your health care provider for a copy of the “Eating More Fibre” handout. You may also ask to see a dietitian.

When do you need medication to help constipation?

There are times when fluids, exercise and fibre are not enough to prevent constipation. Then, you may need medication to help your bowels move.

Medications may be needed for some problems such as hemorrhoids and anal fissures. Soft stools help prevent problems, pain and discomfort.

Constipation is a problem when:

- You find it hard to pass stool.
- Your stomach feels bloated.
- You do not feel hungry and you may have an upset stomach or nausea.
- You feel the urge to have a bowel movement but when you sit on the toilet nothing happens.
- You need to push a lot to have a bowel movement.

There are several types of medications that can help. These are described on pages 5 and 6.

You and your health care providers can decide the best treatment for you. Talk to your pharmacist, dietitian or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns about constipation and how to manage and prevent it.

What types of medications are used to help constipation?

There are 5 types of medication to help constipation:

1. Bulk-forming laxatives

Bulk-forming laxatives add fibre to your stool and make stool softer. Some names for bulk laxatives are psyllium, and citrus fibre. Bulk-forming laxatives usually begin to work in 1 day. It is important to drink plenty of fluids when using bulk-forming laxatives.

2. Emulsifier stool softeners

Emulsifier stool softeners such as docusate help your stool hold water. Docusate begins to work in 1 to 2 days. Docusate liquid has a bitter taste.

3. Glycerin suppositories

Glycerin suppositories help lubricate the stool so it can slide out easy. Glycerin suppositories will work within 1 hour of using them.

4. Osmotic stool softeners

Osmotic stool softeners such as lactulose and polyethylene glycol (PEG) help stool hold water. This makes it easier for stool to come out. Lactulose works in 1 to 2 days. Gas and cramps are common. Some people do not like the sweet taste of lactulose.

PEG products work in 2 to 4 days. PEG has no taste. Some brand names of PEG products are Lax-a-dayTM and PegalaxTM.

5. Stimulant laxatives

Stimulant laxatives such as cascara, bisacodyl and senna push stool out. Tablets may take 6 to 12 hours to work. Suppositories often work within 15 minutes.

Your goal is to use stimulant laxatives only when needed. When used too much for too long, your bowel becomes weak and lazy and it is hard to maintain bowel control.

Remember ...



If you are taking medication for constipation, continue to get regular exercise and drink fluids. Most medications are safe for regular use.

Talk to your health care provider before taking any of these medications on a regular basis.

Helpful hints for having a bowel movement

Diet, exercise, work, social schedules and stress all effect how well your bowels move. You need to pay attention to your body's signs telling you it is time to go to the bathroom. It may take weeks or months to get into a normal healthy bowel routine.

- ✓ Go to the bathroom when you feel the urge. Do not ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.
- ✓ Relax in a private spot. Read a book or magazine.
- ✓ Drink a warm glass of water or other liquid.
- ✓ Have your feet flat on the floor or on a foot stool when you sit on the toilet.
- ✓ Do not push or strain to have a bowel movement.

Remember to ask for help before you become constipated. Talk to your health care provider.
