

Staying Regular (Constipation Relief)

What is constipation?

Constipation is a condition in which people have uncomfortable, difficult or infrequent bowel movements. Uncomfortable and difficult means that a person must strain, and feels pain or distress in order to have a bowel movement. Infrequent means 3 or fewer bowel movements a week.

What is normal?

Some people have a daily bowel movement, some 3 times a day, and others have an every other day routine. The important word is 'routine'. It is not true that you must have a daily bowel movement to be considered normal.

Stools are solid waste formed after all nutrients have been absorbed through the intestinal walls. This solid waste contains dead cells, indigestible parts of food, and other waste products. The ability to have a bowel movement involves several functions including the muscular motion of the intestinal wall, normal nerve function, how much fluid is in the waste, and the bulk of the waste.

What causes constipation?

Just about everyone has been constipated at some time. The most common causes are:

- Not enough physical activity
- Not enough water
- Travel
- Illness
- Pregnancy- due to hormonal changes and the pressure the fetus places on the intestines.
- Getting older
- Not enough fiber in the diet and too much fatty food
- Medication used to treat medical problems
- Poor bowel habits

How to treat constipation

Lifestyle changes might be all you need. Try these options before you buy stool softeners, laxatives or fiber tablets.

- Make sure that you get physical exercise every day such as walking, Tai Chi, swimming, bicycling. Doctors are not sure why physical activity helps, but it does!
- Drink 6-8 glasses of water every day. Broth (low salt), unsweetened fruit juices (if you are not diabetic), vegetable juices, and tea can be included to make up the amount of fluid you need. Soda, coffee and alcohol are not good choices.
- Do not wait to use the restroom. If you need to go, go.
- Get enough fiber in your diet. Fiber adds bulk to the stool and makes it easier to eliminate. Foods high in fiber include: bran, dry beans, sweet potatoes, pears, apples, plums and prunes, oatmeal, nuts, peas, corn, multigrain or brown rice and whole grains.

What is enough fiber?

Your goal should be 21-38 grams of fiber a day. Look for foods that have at least 3 grams of dietary fiber per serving.

A serving is:

- 1 medium fruit
- 1 cup raw or ½ cup cooked leafy green vegetables
- ½ cup cooked brown rice or oats
- ½ cup cooked dry beans
- 1 slice whole wheat bread
- 1/3-cup nuts

When all else fails

Fiber tablets and powders can be bought without a prescription and are taken with a full glass of water. Some people will benefit from this as an option if they are not able to eat enough fiber.

Stool softeners work by increasing water in the stool so that it becomes bulkier, softer and easier to eliminate from the body. These products work with the natural contraction of the colon. Stool softeners are helpful for people who should not strain, have recently had surgery or are on medications that cause constipation.

Laxatives taken as a pill, liquid or suppository increase the activity of the muscles in the colon causing them to contract. This increased activity causes a bowel movement. Laxatives should not be used routinely because they can actually damage the colon and normal muscular contraction might not return. Laxatives can be habit forming.

Do not give laxatives to pregnant women, children or infants without checking with the doctor.

You should see your doctor if you have:

- Intense abdominal pain with or without constipation
- Blood in your stool
- Constipation that alternates with diarrhea
- Thin, pencil like stools
- Unexplained weight loss
- Bowel movements less than 2 times a week even after trying ways to get rid of constipation
- Bowel movements where the stool is white or gray
- Other changes in bowel habits

Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. It is usually a signal that an individual is not eating correctly, drinking enough liquids or getting enough exercise. Sometimes constipation is a symptom of something more serious and you should check with your doctor, but first try liquids, exercise and healthier food choices.