

A guide to managing constipation

What is constipation?

Each person will have his or her own understanding of the problem. Doctors agree that there are many different symptoms. You may have one or more, and they include:

- Having small hard stools that you have to strain to pass.
- Needing to spend more than 10 minutes on the toilet.
- Feeling full or bloated and experiencing wind.
- Feeling that you cannot completely empty your bowels.
- Going to the toilet less than three times a week.
- Having pain in your stomach or back passage.
- Feeling sick or nauseous.
- Losing your appetite.
- Having a bad taste in your mouth.
- Feeling depressed and tired.
- Infrequently, when constipation has gone on for a very long while, confusion, diarrhoea and incontinence can occur and there can be problems passing water.

Altogether, having constipation can be very miserable and can spoil your enjoyment of life.

What is causing the problem?

There can be many different causes and it can be a mixture of things which include:

- Lack of exercise.
- A low fibre diet or very small appetite.
- Dehydration, when you have not drunk enough fluid.
- A change of routine like going into hospital or on holiday.
- Ignoring the feeling of wanting to have the bowels opened perhaps because of pain, tiredness, busyness, breathlessness or lack of privacy.
- Some medical conditions including depression and anxiety, cancer, severe lung disease, diabetes, colitis, hernias, diverticular disease, haemorrhoids, previous surgery and damage to the spinal nerves.
- Certain medicines including morphine, codeine and other opiates, tricyclics (e.g. amitriptyline and dosulepin).

How can constipation be treated and prevented?

There are several things you can do to help yourself manage constipation. These include:

- Making sure you drink plenty of fluids; 6-8 glasses a day is recommended (alcohol does not count).
- Increasing the amount of fibre in your diet by eating wholemeal foods instead of refined. For instance wholemeal bread, brown rice, wholewheat pasta and cereals like bran flakes, All Bran, Shredded Wheat, Shreddies, muesli and porridge oats.
- Linseed in particular can help, as can other seeds and nuts, as well as pulses like peas, beans and lentils or bulky foods like sweet corn. These foods work by absorbing water so the gut contents are bulkier, softer and more easily passed along.
- All of us are advised to eat at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables every day to boost our general health. Most fruit and vegetables contain some fibre but certain fruits such as prunes, plums, pineapple, papaya, grapes and kiwis can be useful in controlling constipation. It may be worth experimenting to see if anything in particular helps you.

- Exercise also affects bowel regularity, so a gradual increase in daily exercise within your physical limits is a good idea. You might find walking, cycling or swimming each day works for you.
- Try not to ignore the need to go to the toilet. Often this is first thing in the morning or straight after a meal. It may help to try to have your bowels opened at the same time each day.
- When you use the toilet, try sitting in a squatting position, perhaps putting your feet on a low stool. This will help you push down more easily with your tummy muscles.
- Some people find that leaning forward and relaxing helps then open their bowels more easily.
- Discussion of these issues with your doctor or nurse might enable you to assess together if some additional help is needed in the form of a medicine.

What medicines might I be offered?

Medicines to help you go to the toilet are called laxatives.

Medicines by mouth include:

- Bulking agents like Normacol, Ispagel and Fybogel, which are prescribed by a doctor. Wheat, oat and soya bran, which can be bought in supermarkets and health food shops. Like other forms of fibre, they soak up water to make the stools heavier and softer and help the gut pass them along. It is important to drink extra fluid whilst taking these.
- Stimulants include Senna, Bisacodyl and Docusate Sodium. These cause the gut to move the contents along faster.
- Lactulose, Laxido and Movicol are osmotic agents that soften the stool by causing it to absorb more water. Again it is important to drink extra fluid whilst taking these.
- Faecal softeners like liquid paraffin are old fashioned and not advised any more.
- If constipation becomes very severe and no other remedy helps, a rectal laxative, like an enema or suppository is needed. These are put into the back passage and stimulate the gut to work.

Some doctors will prescribe more than one laxative so that they can be used together.

How long will laxatives take to work?

Most of the laxatives taken by mouth take one or two days to work. Lactulose is thought to be the slowest and needs to be taken regularly for two or three days. Suppositories and enemas should work more quickly, within an hour or two. Stimulant laxatives taken by mouth take about 8 hours to work and are usually taken at bed-time.

Are there any side effects?

As with all medicines, side effects may occur. This could include wind, tummy discomfort, nausea and diarrhoea. It is important to follow your doctor's or pharmacist's instructions when using laxatives. Always take advice from your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Are laxatives suitable for long term use?

In most cases, you should only take laxatives occasionally and on a short-term basis. Using laxatives frequently or every day without medical advice can be harmful. Always take advice from your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Using laxatives on a long-term basis can make your body dependent on them, so your bowel no longer functions properly without the medication. Overusing laxatives can also cause diarrhoea, dehydration and unbalanced levels of salts and minerals in your body.

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