

Constipation



The Facts

Constipation means having fewer than three bowel movements per week; difficulty or pain passing stools; or hard, dry, and small stools.



Constipation affects up to 40% of elderly people, with women being more affected. While occasional constipation is not dangerous, chronic constipation can lead to more significant health problems. These include: hemorrhoids, anal fissures, diverticulosis, fecal impaction, and even bowel obstruction. Constipation may cause abdominal discomfort, loss of appetite, and diminish quality of life.

Contributing Factors

1. Sedentary lifestyle: Weakened muscles in the abdomen and pelvic floor slow down bowel movements..
2. Lack of dietary fibre: Fibre absorbs water and bulks up stools making them easier to pass.
3. Inadequate hydration: Diminished thirst, chronic diseases, and medications can lead to dehydration, which causes harder stool consistency
4. Medications: Prescription drugs, over-the-counter antacids, anti-nauseants, anti-histamines, calcium, and iron supplements, can all cause constipation.
5. Chronic medical conditions: Nervous system or other conditions that reduce energy and muscle strength can decrease a person's ability to expel stools.

What Can I do?

Fluids and Diet:

Drink at least 8 glasses of fluid each day to soften stools. Increase your intake of high-fibre foods, such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and legumes. Aim for 20-30 grams of fibre per day. Increase fiber intake gradually, to avoid bloating, gas, and other digestive problems.

Exercise:

Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise daily, to stimulate the digestive tract and promote bowel movements.

Natural Laxatives:

Figs, dates, prunes, chia seeds, and flax seeds are high in fibre and are natural laxatives. Psyllium husk (e.g. Metamucil™) absorbs water and forms a gel-like substance in the intestines. This makes stools softer and easier to pass.

Add 1 tablespoon of chia seeds, flax seeds, or psyllium to liquid foods, such as yogurt, smoothies, or soups, once or twice daily. Combine these natural laxatives with sufficient fluids to avoid choking or creating large hard stools, which can lead to obstruction.

Commercial Laxatives:

Laxatives can help when diet and exercise are insufficient. We recommend:

- Polyethylene glycol (e.g. Restoralax™ or Lax-a-Day™) and lactulose which draw water into stools. Add 1 tablespoon to a glass of water once or twice daily.
- Stimulant laxatives like senna or bisacodyl can be added at night if there has been no bowel movement after 2 days. Note: these can cause side effects such as cramping and diarrhea, and daily use can lead to loss of effectiveness and a sluggish bowel.
- Suppositories may be helpful if there is no bowel movement after three days.

Avoid: 1) Fibre pills/capsules. 2) Mineral oil because of the risk of lung problems and rectal irritation. 3) Milk of magnesia if you have kidney problems.