

## Constipation - self-care

### Description

Constipation is when you do not pass stool as often as you normally do. Your stool becomes hard and dry, and it is difficult to pass.

### Signs, Symptoms, and Causes

You might feel bloated and have pain, or you might have to strain when you try to go.

Some medicines, and even some vitamins, can make you constipated. You can also get constipated if you do not get enough fiber, drink enough water, or get enough exercise. You can also get constipated if you put off going to the bathroom even though you have the urge to go.

Try to get to know your normal bowel movement pattern, so that you can keep constipation from getting worse.

### How to Relieve Constipation

Exercise regularly. Drink more water and eat more fiber. Try to walk, swim, or do something active at least 3 or 4 times a week.

If you feel the urge to go to the bathroom, go. DO NOT wait or hold it in.

You can also train your bowels to be more regular. It may help to go to the bathroom every day at the same time. For many people, this is after breakfast or dinner.

### Eating When you Have Constipation

Try these things to relieve your constipation:

- DO NOT skip meals.
- Avoid processed or fast foods, such as white breads, pastries, doughnuts, sausage, fast-food burgers, potato chips, and French fries.

Many foods are good natural laxatives that will help you move your bowels. High-fiber foods help move waste through your body. Add foods with fiber to your diet slowly, because eating more fiber can cause bloating and gas.

Drink 8 to 10 cups (2 to 2.5 L) of liquids, particularly water, every day.

Ask your health care provider how much fiber to take each day. Males, females, and different age groups all have different daily fiber needs.

Most fruits will help ease constipation. Berries, peaches, apricots, plums, raisins, rhubarb, and prunes are just some of the fruits that may help. DO NOT peel fruits that have edible skins, because a lot of the fiber is in the skin.

Choose breads, crackers, pasta, pancakes, and waffles made with whole grains, or make your own. Use brown rice or wild rice instead of white rice. Eat high-fiber cereals.

Vegetables can also add fiber to your diet. Some high-fiber vegetables are asparagus, broccoli, corn, squash, and potatoes (with the skin still on). Salads made with lettuce, spinach, and cabbage will also help.

Legumes (navy beans, kidney beans, chickpeas, soybeans, and lentils), peanuts, walnuts, and almonds will also add fiber to your diet.

Other foods you can eat are:

- Fish, chicken, turkey, or other lean meats. These do not have fiber, but they will not make constipation worse.
- Snacks such as raisin cookies, fig bars, and popcorn.

You can also sprinkle 1 or 2 teaspoons (5 to 10 mL) of bran flakes, ground flax seeds, wheat bran, or psyllium on foods such as yogurt, cereal, and soup. Or, add them to your smoothie.

### Laxatives, Stool Softeners, and Other Products

You can buy stool softeners at any pharmacy. They will help you pass stool more easily.

Your provider may prescribe a laxative to relieve your constipation. It may be a pill or liquid. **DO NOT** take it if you have severe stomach pain, nausea, or vomiting. **DO NOT** take it for more than 1 week. It should start to work in 2 to 5 days.

- Only take a laxative as often as your provider recommends. Most laxatives are taken with meals and at bedtime.
- You can mix powder laxatives with milk or fruit juice to make them taste better.
- Always drink plenty of water (8 to 10 cups, or 2 to 2.5 L a day) when you are using laxatives.
- Store your laxative medicine safely in a medicine cabinet, where children cannot get to it.
- Do not take any other laxatives or medicines before talking with your provider. This includes mineral oil.

Some people get a rash, nausea, or a sore throat while taking laxatives. Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding and children under age 6 years should **NOT** take laxatives without the advice of a provider.

Bulk-forming laxatives such as Metamucil or Perdiem can help pull water into your intestines and make your stools more bulky.

### When to Call the Doctor

Call your provider if you:

- Have not had a bowel movement in 3 days
- Are bloated or have pain in your stomach
- Have nausea or throw up
- Have blood in your stool

### References

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