

Constipation

What is constipation? Constipation can be defined as a condition in which bowel movements occur less often than usual, or bowel movements consist of hard, dry stools that are painful or difficult to pass. Everyone has different bowel movement habits. How often people have bowel movements can vary from 3 times a day to 3 times a week.

Occasional constipation is common and affects almost one out three people. Constipation can be extremely distressing and ruin a person's quality of life.

What Are the Symptoms of Constipation?

- Unable to move your bowels
- Small, hard stool
- Straining to pass stool
- Bowel movements less often than every 3 days
- Increased gas
- Feeling full or bloated
- A full feeling in the rectum after a bowel movement
- Pain when having a bowel movement

What Causes Constipation?

- Changes in diet and fluid intake
- Decreased activity or exercise
- Nausea and vomiting
- Any medical problem that affects the bowel, such as cancer, inflammatory bowel syndrome (IBS), diabetes, or low thyroid
- Abnormalities in the blood, such as high calcium
- Many diseases affecting the nervous system, such as peripheral neuropathy, spinal cord injury, or Parkinson's disease
- Many types of medications, such as opioids, antacids, some chemotherapy drugs, antidepressants, iron supplements, or allergy medicines with antihistamines and anticonvulsants.

Keeping Track

If constipation is a problem, it is helpful to keep a diary to share with your doctor. Be sure to answer the following questions:

- When do bowel movements occur?
- Did you need a laxative or enema to have a bowel movement?
- Are your bowel movements associated with pain, or dry and hard stools?

What Can You Do To Help Yourself?

- Unless your doctor tells you differently, it is important to eat a diet with lots of fiber and to drink water frequently throughout the day.
- Good fiber sources include:
 - Whole-grain breads and cereals
 - Fresh fruits and vegetables
 - Beans, peas, and nuts
- Exercise, at least by taking daily walks, if you can.
- Go to the bathroom when you feel the urge to go.
- Do not avoid the urge to move your bowels.
- Discuss the use of laxatives with your doctor or nurse.



Care for Constipation

- If constipation is caused by an illness or medication, your doctor may recommend changes in your treatment to try to relieve constipation.
- Although some people prefer enemas, most try to control constipation using laxatives. Laxatives include many products that are sold over-the-counter in pharmacies and markets, and other products that are only available with a doctor's prescription.

What Are Different Types of Over-the-Counter Laxatives and How Do They Work?

Stool softeners work by wetting and softening the stool. The medication docusate sodium (or Colace), works this way.

Bulk-forming laxatives are sometimes called fiber supplements. They are like fiber in the diet and work partly by absorbing water and increasing the bulk (size) of your stools. *Psyllium* (or Metamucil), *polycarbophil* (or FiberCon), and *methylcellulose* (or Citrucel) work in this way. Some patients do not tolerate fiber. Ask your doctor, and if you do take a fiber supplement, start slowly and make sure to drink plenty of fluids.

Osmotic laxatives work by increasing the amount of fluid in the bowel. The stool softens and expands, stimulating the muscles of the walls of the bowels to

work. *Polyethylene glycol* (or Miralax and Lactulose) are examples of this type of laxative.

Stimulant laxatives laxatives stimulate the nerves in the large bowel (the colon and rectum—sometimes called the large intestine). This then causes the muscle in the wall of the large bowel to squeeze harder than usual. This pushes the stool along and out. *Senna* and *biscodyl* are stimulants.

When Are Prescription Medicines Used for Constipation?

Occasionally, patients have constipation from opioid drugs that is not helped even with some over-the-counter laxatives. There are several prescription drugs now available for this problem. Ask your doctor if you find yourself in this situation.

Call Your Doctor if You Have Any of the Following Symptoms:

- Fever
- Weakness or feeling very sick
- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting bile (bright yellow or green fluid)
- Abdomen is more swollen than usual
- Severe rectal pain
- Leaking stool from rectum
- Blood in your stool or in the toilet

Patient Education Series

Constipation

When your symptoms are managed, you will:

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.