

## CONSTIPATION

Constipation is defined as having a bowel movement fewer than three times per week. With constipation stools are usually hard, dry, small in size, and difficult to eliminate. Some people who are constipated find it painful to have a bowel movement and often experience straining, bloating, and the sensation of a full bowel.

Some people think they are constipated if they do not have a bowel movement every day. However, normal stool elimination may be three times a day or three times a week, depending on the person.

Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. Almost everyone experiences constipation at some point in their life, and a poor diet typically is the cause. Most constipation is temporary and not serious. Understanding its causes, prevention, and treatment will help most people find relief.

### Who gets constipated?

Constipation is one of the most common gastrointestinal complaints in the United States. More than 4 million Americans have frequent constipation, accounting for 2.5 million physician visits a year. Those reporting constipation most often are women and adults ages 65 and older. Pregnant women may have constipation, and it is a common problem following childbirth or surgery.

Self-treatment of constipation with over-the-counter (OTC) laxatives is by far the most common aid. Around \$725 million is spent on laxative products each year in America.

### What causes constipation?

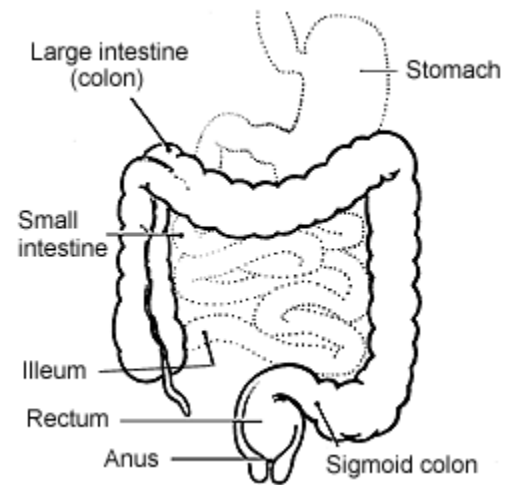
To understand constipation, it helps to know how the colon, or large intestine, works. As food moves through the colon, the colon absorbs water from the food while it forms waste products, or stool. Muscle contractions in the colon then push the stool toward the rectum. By the time stool reaches the rectum it is solid, because most of the water has been absorbed.

Constipation occurs when the colon absorbs too much water or if the colon's muscle contractions are slow or sluggish, causing the stool to move through the colon too slowly. As a result, stools can become hard and dry. Common causes of constipation are

- not enough fiber in the diet
- lack of physical activity (especially in the elderly)
- medications
- milk
- irritable bowel syndrome
- changes in life or routine such as pregnancy, aging, and travel
- abuse of laxatives
- ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- dehydration
- specific diseases or conditions, such as stroke (most common)
- problems with the colon and rectum
- problems with intestinal function (chronic idiopathic constipation)

### How is constipation treated?

Although treatment depends on the cause, severity, and duration of the constipation, in most cases dietary and lifestyle changes will help relieve symptoms and help prevent them from recurring.



Lower digestive system

## Diet

A diet with enough fiber (20 to 35 grams each day) helps the body form soft, bulky stool. A doctor or dietitian can help plan an appropriate diet. High-fiber foods include beans, whole grains and bran cereals, fresh fruits, and vegetables such as asparagus, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and carrots. For people prone to constipation, limiting foods that have little or no fiber, such as ice cream, cheese, meat, and processed foods, is also important.

## Lifestyle Changes

Other changes that may help treat and prevent constipation include drinking enough water and other liquids, such as fruit and vegetable juices and clear soups, so as not to become dehydrated, engaging in daily exercise, and reserving enough time to have a bowel movement. In addition, the urge to have a bowel movement should not be ignored.

### Can constipation be serious?

Sometimes constipation can lead to complications. These complications include hemorrhoids, caused by straining to have a bowel movement, or anal fissures (tears in the skin around the anus) caused when hard stool stretches the sphincter muscle. As a result, rectal bleeding may occur, appearing as bright red streaks on the surface of the stool. Treatment for hemorrhoids may include warm tub baths, ice packs, and application of a special cream to the affected area. Treatment for anal fissures may include stretching the sphincter muscle or surgically removing the tissue or skin in the affected area.

Sometimes straining causes a small amount of intestinal lining to push out from the anal opening. This condition, known as rectal prolapse, may lead to secretion of mucus from the anus. Usually eliminating the cause of the prolapse, such as straining or coughing, is the only treatment necessary. Severe or chronic prolapse requires surgery to strengthen and tighten the anal sphincter muscle or to repair the prolapsed lining.

Constipation may also cause hard stool to pack the intestine and rectum so tightly that the normal pushing action of the colon is not enough to expel the stool. This condition, called fecal impaction, occurs most often in children and older adults. An impaction can be softened with mineral oil taken by mouth and by an enema. After softening the impaction, the doctor may break up and remove part of the hardened stool by inserting one or two fingers into the anus.

### Points to Remember

- Constipation affects almost everyone at one time or another.
- Many people think they are constipated when, in fact, their bowel movements are regular.
- The most common causes of constipation are poor diet and lack of exercise.
- Other causes of constipation include medications, irritable bowel syndrome, abuse of laxatives, and specific diseases.
- A medical history and physical exam may be the only diagnostic tests needed before the doctor suggests treatment.
- In most cases, following these simple tips will help relieve symptoms and prevent recurrence of constipation:
  - Eat a well-balanced, high-fiber diet that includes beans, bran, whole grains, fresh fruits, and vegetables.
  - Drink plenty of liquids.
  - Exercise regularly.
  - Set aside time after breakfast or dinner for undisturbed visits to the toilet.
  - Do not ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.
  - Understand that normal bowel habits vary.
  - Whenever a significant or prolonged change in bowel habits occurs, check with a doctor.
- Most people with mild constipation do not need laxatives. However, a doctor may recommend laxatives for a limited time for people with chronic constipation.

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