

Constipation refers to hard, inadequate, incomplete, or infrequent bowel movements.

What to look for

- hard stools that are difficult or painful to pass.
- no bowel movements in three days for adults, four days for children.
- nausea, anxiety, headache and general discomfort

Your food is normally passed along the intestines by muscle action called peristalsis. Constipation is simply interference with this process.

How many times you have bowel movements is entirely dependant on what and how often you eat, your lifestyle and the type of person you are. There is no 'right' amount of bowel movements, however if there is a gap of about 3 days since your last movement, and this is not normal for you, you may have constipation.

Causes

There are a number of possible causes of this condition -

- your lifestyle
- not eating enough fibre or
- drinking enough water,
- not getting enough exercise,
- avoiding going to the toilet when you know you need to.
- Emotional and psychological problems.
- Persistent, chronic constipation may also be a symptom of more serious disorders, including irritable bowel syndrome, diverticulitis, colorectal cancer, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, and depression.

Children can become victims of constipation especially when starting school or a new venture. Bottle-fed babies tend to have more constipation than breast-fed babies. Being sensitive to pain, children may avoid the toilet if they have minor splits or tears in the anus from straining or other irritations.

Constipation tends to be more pronounced during pregnancy. Constipation in the elderly usually occurs for lack of dietary fibre and lack of exercise. Some drugs and vitamin supplements can cause constipation, as can some dietary iron and calcium supplements.

Traditional Treatment

Your constipation is generally helped by changing your diet to include more fibre and if necessary, taking a laxative. However, be aware that the prolonged use of laxatives is not desirable and may lead to a dependency. If it is more severe, other action may have to be taken.

Dietary Considerations

You should start with increasing the amount of fibre in your diet and this is not difficult. Eat more raw fruits and vegetables, especially peas, beans, and broccoli, bran cereals, whole-wheat bread, and dried fruits such as raisins, figs, and prunes. These foods are rich in vitamins and minerals as well! Avoid red meat, chicken, milk and cheese

Otherwise, try a fibre supplement.. But remember to have lots of water with these.

Another way to treat constipation is to drink a glass of warm water with the juice of a whole lemon in it after waking up in the morning.

To Sum Up

- Eat more fibre. Some good sources are bran and other whole-grain cereals, raw or cooked dried fruits like raisins and prunes, cooked dried beans, popcorn, and nuts.
- Drink six to eight glasses of filtered water daily, in addition to your regular beverages with meals.
- Go to the toilet at the same time every day (preferably after a meal) and take enough time to let your bowels move fully. If you need to move your bowels at other times, don't stop yourself.

When to seek further professional advice

- you have lower abdominal pain when trying to pass stools
- you have blood in your stools;
- your constipation develops after you start a new prescription drug or take vitamin or mineral supplements you may need to discontinue or change dosage.
- you or your child has been constipated for two weeks, with recurrent abdominal pain

- you are elderly or disabled and have been constipated for a week or more; you may have an impacted stool