



Constipation

Patient Education Series

What is constipation?

Constipation is a universal affliction in which your bowel movements are abnormally delayed or infrequent. Symptoms of constipation usually wax and wane for months or years. It is the most common gastrointestinal complaint in the U.S.

What causes it?

- ◆ Diets low in fiber
- ◆ Inactivity
- ◆ Laxative abuse
- ◆ Pregnancy
- ◆ Use of certain drugs such as iron, calcium, antacids with aluminum or calcium, antidepressants, or cough suppressants and/or pain relievers that contain codeine
- ◆ An underlying disease (low level of thyroid hormone, diabetes, dehydration, or depression)
- ◆ Travel, especially to areas where bathrooms are unfamiliar, dirty, or not available when needed
- ◆ Change of routine (diet changes and illness)

For young adults, constipation is not usually an organic problem but a functional one that results from inactivity and a diet low in fiber. It is sometimes made worse by regular laxative use.

What is normal?

In general, most physicians agree that bowel movements occurring anywhere from 3 times a week to 3 times a day are within normal range and not anything to worry about. It is thought that comfortable patterns of elimination are dependent on a balanced diet and exercise.

When should I see a medical provider?

- ◆ If constipation is a new problem
- ◆ If you also have abdominal pain
- ◆ If your stools are black (the use of “Pepto-Bismol” or iron may cause black stools)
- ◆ If you see blood in your stool (bright red blood in small amounts is often seen with the passage of hard stools). This may be caused by damage to the tissue around the rectum or by bleeding from a hemorrhoid, and is not serious in nature.
- ◆ If you need to use laxatives regularly

How is constipation treated?

- ◆ Increase your activity. Get 30 minutes of exercise each day.
- ◆ Establish a convenient, uninterrupted time for a bowel movement each day. Bowel activity and mobility is greatest about 15 to 20 minutes after breakfast, so this may be the best time. If the urge to have a bowel movement is ignored, the stool becomes increasingly dry and hard and constipation is almost inevitable or becomes worse. Straining is not recommended because it can cause a tightening of muscles that should actually be relaxed during a comfortable bowel movement.
- ◆ Drink 8 glasses of liquid a day, especially water.
- ◆ Gradually increase the fiber in your diet. The American Dietetic Association recommends eating 20 to 35 grams of fiber a day. The fiber acts like a large sponge in the bowel because it holds water and keeps waste moving. For breakfast each day you should eat bran cereal and fruit. Raw vegetables and fruit, grains, beans, and cereals all contain important fiber. Remember — you have to drink liquids for fiber to work.
- ◆ If dietary and exercise efforts fail, a non-digestible fiber powder such as Metamucil (psyllium) may help. It acts to increase the bulk in your stool but must be taken with plenty of fluids to prevent any problem with blockage in the bowel. The usual dose is 1 heaping teaspoon in an 8oz. glass of water or juice. Psyllium can be taken long term without adverse effects.

When can I expect normal bowel movements?

It takes patience and a change in diet and lifestyle to solve constipation — there is no quick and easy answer. It may take 4 to 6 weeks to re-establish normal bowel function, especially if laxatives have been used on a regular basis. Increase the fiber in your diet gradually because your stomach and intestines need time to get used to this change. Be aware that increases in fiber may cause gas and bloating temporarily.

1/03