

Constipation

Constipation means being unable to empty your bowel and pass faeces as often or as easily as you usually do or would like to do. Constipation is very common, and can be well managed with diet, exercise and medicines.

Normal, healthy bowel emptying varies from person to person, ranging from several times a day to two or three times a week. Constipation means being unable to empty your bowel as often as you usually do or would like to do. It also means having hard, dry faeces (stools, bowel motions, poo) that are difficult or uncomfortable to pass.

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms of constipation include:

- Passing faeces less often than usual
- Straining to pass faeces
- Discomfort when trying to pass faeces
- Hard, dry, lumpy faeces

- Feeling the bowel has not fully emptied after opening
- Discomfort or pain in the lower back or stomach
- Feeling bloated
- Nausea, decreased appetite
- Feeling irritable

Most constipation is temporary and not serious, but some people have chronic (persistent) constipation. Chronic constipation can lead to complications including faecal impaction (rectum is plugged with dry, hard faeces) and faecal incontinence (liquid faeces leak from rectum).

Causes

A number of things can cause constipation or increase a tendency to become constipated, including:

- Not eating enough fibre-containing foods (e.g. wholegrains, fresh fruit and vegetables)
- Not drinking enough water
- Losing body fluid (e.g. excessive sweating)
- Not exercising regularly or being less active than usual
- Delaying bowel opening
- A change of diet, daily routine or lifestyle
- Pregnancy
- Hormone changes around the start of a woman's menstrual period
- Increasing age
- Stress
- Some medical conditions (e.g. irritable bowel syndrome, depression, Parkinson's disease, thyroid disorder, bowel cancer)
- Some medicines (e.g. iron, calcium, verapamil, pain relievers, antidepressants).

Many healthy children have problems with constipation, especially while toilet training.

Self care

- Include plenty of fibre in your diet (e.g. fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and seeds). Increase the amount of

fibre in your diet gradually, to help avoid bloating and wind.

- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).
- If possible, exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week, to help develop and maintain good abdominal muscle tone. If you are not able to move about, it may help to sit up instead of lying down.
- Do not ignore the urge to open your bowel.
- Visit the toilet first thing in the morning or soon after meals, when digestive tract muscles are the most active.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to relieve stress.
- Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice if a medical condition or medicine makes you constipated.

Note: Sitting position on the toilet can affect bowel function. It is best to lean forward with a straight back, and with feet flat on the floor or on a foot-stool, so that knees are above the hips.

Medicines

Medicines are sometimes necessary to help relieve or prevent constipation.

Laxatives

There are several different types of laxatives and they are available in several different forms (e.g. granules,

tablets, syrups, rectal suppositories and enemas). Different laxatives have different actions in the bowel and also differ in how quickly they work. The choice of a laxative product depends on how severe the constipation is, the cause of the constipation and the age of the constipated person.

Side effects of laxatives include abdominal pain, wind and bloating. Laxatives can be purchased from a pharmacy without a doctor's prescription. Ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice about laxatives.

Bulk forming laxatives

(fibre supplements such as ispaghula, guar gum, psyllium, sterculia): Increase bulk and water in the faeces, which makes the faeces bigger and softer. This helps faeces to pass through the bowel quickly and easily. Most fibre supplements need to be taken with plenty of water.

Osmotic laxatives (e.g. glycerol, lactulose, sorbitol, macrogols, magnesium, citrate, phosphate, sulfate): Increase the amount of fluid in the bowel. This makes the faeces bigger and softer, and helps faeces to pass through the bowel quickly and easily.

Stimulant laxatives (e.g. bisacodyl, senna, frangula, sodium picosulfate): Increase the activity of bowel muscles.

Stool softeners (e.g. docusate, liquid paraffin, poloxalkol): Soften faeces, so they are easier to pass. Stool softeners are very mild laxatives.

Important

Every one has their own pattern for emptying their bowel (bowel habit) and constipation means different things to different people. Constipation can sometimes be a symptom of a more serious condition.

Consult a doctor if:

- Your usual bowel habit changes suddenly, especially if you are over 50
- You get alternating constipation and diarrhoea
- Faeces are painful to pass
- Faeces are bloodstained or black and tar-like
- You need to use laxatives regularly (e.g. every 2-3 days or more often)
- You have constipation and other symptoms (e.g. tired, unwell, vomiting, weight loss, headaches, fever)
- You have had symptoms of constipation for more than seven days, with no obvious cause
- Liquid or soft faeces leak out of your anus.

Other medicines

Prucalopride: Increases the activity of digestive tract muscles. It may help some people whose constipation has not been relieved by laxatives. Prucalopride must be prescribed by a doctor.

For more information

A doctor

Listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

A dietitian or the Dietitians' Association

Listed under 'D' in the white pages the phone book

Website: www.daa.asn.au

Gastroenterological Society of Australia

Website: www.gesa.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

NPS: Better choices, Better health

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.***

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