

Constipation

WHAT IS CONSTIPATION?

Constipation is a very common condition that happens to almost everyone. It means that you have bowel movements less often than normal for you, such as fewer than three times a week. Bowel movements can be very hard and sometimes like small pebbles.

Normal bowel movements vary from person to person. For some people, having a bowel movement 3 times a day is normal. For others, three times a week may be normal.

Constipation that bothers you for 12 weeks or more out of the year, even if it's off and on, is called chronic constipation.

WHAT CAUSES CONSTIPATION?

- Waiting too long to go to the bathroom after you feel the need to go
- Not eating enough fiber
- Not drinking enough liquids
- Not getting enough exercise
- Overuse of some types of laxatives
- Taking a medicine that has a side effect of constipation, such as iron pills, antidepressants, or narcotic pain medicine
- **Other possible causes are:**
 - Pregnancy
 - Depression or stress
 - Some medical conditions and diseases that can cause a partial blockage in your bowels

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CONSTIPATION?

Symptoms may include:

- Small, hard, or dry bowel movements
- Uncomfortable or painful bowel movements that are hard to pass
- A longer time than usual between bowel movements
- Abdominal discomfort, feeling full and heavy, like you have a full belly

TREATMENT ADVICE FOR CONSTIPATION

You don't usually need to see your health-care provider for treatment of constipation. Here are some things you can do to relieve constipation:

- Add more fiber to your diet by eating whole-grain bread and cereal, beans, bran muffins, brown rice, and fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Exercise regularly. For example, if you are able, walk for at least 30 minutes every day. Remember to start slow (5 to 10 minutes at first, then increase your time each day or two). If your health-care provider is assisting you to manage a chronic illness, check with them before you change your exercise routine.
- Drink enough liquids each day to keep your urine light yellow or clear in color.
- Go to the bathroom whenever you feel like you need to go. Don't wait.

You don't want to use medicine all the time, but to resolve this current episode, you could try an over-the-counter stool softener or laxative, and then follow the advice provided to prevent constipation again in future.

- Stool softeners are medicines that make your bowel movements easier to pass.
- Bulk laxatives, such as fiber supplements, pull water into the bowels. Extra water in the bowel makes the stool larger, softer, and easier to pass.
- Lubricant laxatives, such as mineral oil, keep water in the bowels, which makes the stool softer and easier to pass.
- Stimulant laxatives, such as milk of magnesia and some other laxatives, help the bowel muscles push the stool through the bowel.

Laxatives may be used for a short time. Try not to use them for more than one week. Many people find fiber supplements, like Metamucil, Citrucel, or other psyllium products, to be helpful, but sometimes these products can make constipation worse.

If taking care of yourself at home does not relieve your constipation, your health-care provider may be able to help.

Suppositories (solid, bullet-shaped medicine inserted up rectum) or enemas (fluid inserted rectally) are another way to help you have a bowel movement. Your health-care provider will tell you how to use these products if recommended.

HOW CAN I PREVENT CONSTIPATION?

You may be able to prevent constipation by drinking plenty of water; eating fiber in fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains; and exercising regularly.

Good sources of fiber include:

- Fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruits and vegetables, especially those with edible seeds or skins, such as potatoes with skin, broccoli, corn, peas, raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, pears, apples, prunes, dates, figs, dried apricots or raisins.
- Whole grain breads, such as 100% whole wheat bread.

- Whole grain cereals, such as oatmeal or shredded wheat.
- High fiber cereals containing wheat bran, wheat germ, oat bran or psyllium.
- Whole grain and higher fiber baking, such as whole wheat or rye crackers, bran muffins, oatmeal cookies, date squares.
- Whole grains such as brown or wild rice, barley, wheat germ, whole grain wheat or buckwheat.
- Whole grain pasta, such as spaghetti or macaroni.
- Cooked dried peas, beans and lentils, such as kidney beans, soybeans, black beans, chick peas and yellow or split peas.
- Nuts and seeds, such as unsalted whole almonds, sunflower seeds and ground flax.

WHEN SHOULD I SEE A HEALTH-CARE PROVIDER?

SEE A HEALTH-CARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY if:

- You are having rectal bleeding (more than small amount, like from a hemorrhoid)
- You are having severe pain

SEE A HEALTH-CARE PROVIDER TODAY if:

- You are uncomfortable with abdominal or rectal pain and your constipation is not resolving
- Your constipation does not resolve after following the treatment advice

Make an appointment during office hours to see your health care provider if:

- You have both bouts of constipation and bouts of diarrhea
- You have pain during bowel movements or for some time afterward
- Your bowel movements are consistently thin like a pencil
- Your bowel movements are dark or tar-colored or have blood in them
- You are losing weight without trying
- If you have developed constipation recently and it's lasted three or more weeks, see your health-care provider to make sure you don't have a medical problem causing the constipation

Tell your health-care provider about all of the medicines and supplements that you take. Ask if any of the products you are using may be causing constipation.

If you haven't spoken to us yet, call Health Links – Info Santé to discuss your symptoms with a nurse. Call back any time if your condition changes and you need assessment, or you have any questions or concerns.

Developed by RelayHealth. Published by RelayHealth.

Copyright © 2017 RelayHealth, a division of McKesson Technologies Inc. All rights reserved.

Reviewed and revised by Health Links - Info Santé Provincial Health Contact Centre, April, 2018

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a health-care professional.