

Health Bulletin

CONSTIPATION

Constipation is a condition of the digestive system where an individual has hard faeces that are difficult to expel.

What is Constipation?

Being constipated means your bowel movements are tough or happen less often than normal. Almost everyone goes through it sooner or later.

Although it's not usually serious, you'll feel much better when your body is back on track.

The normal length of time between bowel movements varies widely from person to person. Some people have them three times a day. Others have them only once or twice a week.

Going longer than 3 or more days without one, though, is usually too long. After 3 days, the stool or faeces become harder and more difficult to pass.

In most cases, this occurs because the colon has absorbed too much water from the food that is in the colon.

The slower the food moves through the digestive tract, the more water the colon will absorb from it.

Consequently, the faeces become dry and hard.

When this happens, defecation (emptying the bowels) can become very painful.

Symptoms of constipation

You may have:

- Few bowel movements

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- Trouble having a bowel movement (straining to go)
- Hard or small stools
- A sense that everything didn't come out
- Swollen belly or belly pain
- Throwing up



Constipation in a young child seen on X-ray. Circles represent areas of fecal matter (stool is white surrounded by black bowel gas).

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Why Does It Happen?

Some causes of constipation include:

- Antacid medicines containing calcium or aluminium
- Changes in your usual diet or activities
- Colon cancer
- Eating a lot of dairy products
- Eating disorders
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Neurological conditions such as Parkinson's disease or multiple sclerosis
- Not being active
- Not enough water or fibre in your diet
- Overuse of laxatives
- Pregnancy
- Problems with the nerves and muscles in the digestive system
- Resisting the urge to have a bowel movement, which some people do because of haemorrhoids
- Some medications (especially strong pain drugs such as narcotics, antidepressants, or iron pills)
- Stress
- Underactive thyroid (called hypothyroidism)

Treatments for constipation

In the majority of cases, constipation resolves itself without any treatment or risk to health.

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The treatment of recurring constipation can include lifestyle changes such as doing more exercise, eating more fibre, and drinking more water.

Usually, laxatives will successfully treat most cases of constipation - but should be used with care and only when necessary. In more difficult cases, the person may need a prescription medication.

It is important to understand the cause of constipation - there could be an underlying illness or condition. Some people with recurring constipation use a daily diary where they record their bowel movements, stool characteristics, and other factors that may help both the doctor and patient devise the best treatment.

Some gastroenterologists comment that there are people who do not allocate enough time for their defecation. Set aside enough time to allow your toilet visit to be unstressed and uninterrupted, and do not ignore an urge to have a bowel movement.

- ✓ Drink two to four extra glasses of water a day, unless your doctor told you to limit fluids for another reason.
- ✓ Try warm liquids, especially in the morning.
- ✓ Add fruits and vegetables to your diet.
- ✓ Eat prunes and bran cereal.

How to avoid constipation

These things can help:

- Eat a well- balanced diet with plenty of fibre. Good sources of fibre are fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole-grain bread and cereal (especially bran).
- Drink 1 1/2 to 2 litres of water and other fluids a day (unless your doctor has you on a fluid-restricted diet). Fiber and water work together to keep you regular.

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- Avoid caffeine. It can be dehydrating.
- Cut back on milk. Some people may need to avoid it because dairy products may be constipating for them.
- Exercise regularly. Do something active for at least 30 minutes a day, most days of the week.
- Go to the bathroom when you feel the urge.