

Constipation

Constipation is generally defined as decreased frequency of bowel movements, excessive straining, incomplete evacuation and hard stools. It is a very common problem associated with the American diet. The "normal" frequency of bowel movements (BMs) varies from person to person and can be anywhere from 3 to 12 times a week. Many physicians consider anything less than 3 bowel movements per week as abnormal, and recommend one bowel movement (BM) per day. Most people do not have a regular schedule or set number of BMs per day. You should always discuss with your health care provider if you have problems with constipation, especially if it is something that you have not experienced before. The combination of abdominal pain, constipation and vomiting to must be evaluated by a healthcare practitioner as soon as possible.

Causes: Dietary habits seem to be the number one cause of constipation. Unfortunately, fruits and vegetables are not on the top of the diet list of most Americans. Additionally, water intake is often insufficient. Lack of or decreased physical activity is another contributing factor. Certain medications both prescription and over-the-counter can cause constipation. Examples include: Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen), pain medicines, appetite suppressants (like Phentermine and Diethylpropion), diuretics, high blood pressure medications, calcium and iron supplements, anti-diarrhea medications, etc. Another very common cause of constipation is Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), which usually causes alternating periods of constipation/diarrhea. However, for some people with IBS, constipation is the main symptom. Many systemic illnesses are associated with constipation including: Hypothyroidism, Hyperparathyroidism, Cancer (especially colon cancer), Diabetes, Parkinson's, Multiple Sclerosis and other neurologic, metabolic, endocrine and structural abnormalities can either cause constipation or make it worse.

Treatment: The American Dietetic Association (ADA) recommends 20-35g/day of fiber depending on each individual's caloric intake. Always read your food labels as an important source of information including the fiber content.

1. We recommend 70% of your caloric intake should come from fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Raw fruits and vegetables provide **more fiber** compared to cooked ones. High fiber cereals are recommended such as Fiber One, Kashi, All Bran etc. 100% whole grain foods like wheat bread, pastas, noodles and brown rice are good source of fiber. Make sure to add beans and oats to your meals. Increased dietary fiber can cause temporary bloating, abdominal distention and gas/flatulence. These symptoms will improve with time and should start to gradually decrease after 2 weeks.
2. Drink at 8-10 (8oz) glasses of **water**/fluid per day.
3. **Exercise** daily! You should walk at least 30 min/day at a moderate pace.
4. Listen to your body. Take **bathroom breaks** when your bowels need to move.
5. OTC **fiber supplements** such as Fiber Con, Metamucil, and Benefiber etc. are useful to supplement dietary fiber. Fiber Con seems to be less associated with gas/flatulence and it comes in a pill form.
6. Another good tip is to add a **magnesium supplement**. You may take one daily and follow the instructions on the bottle. It will help replenish Magnesium that is depleted in situations of stress and it will help your BMs and provide other benefits. A handful of pumpkin seeds a day can provide extra Magnesium that you may need.
7. **Stool softeners** such as Colace (Docusate Sodium) can be added when needed. You can take 100 mg daily.
8. **Miralax** is a powder laxative that is mixed with water or juice to increase the amount of water in your stool, making your BMs softer and more frequent.
9. The frequent use of stimulant laxatives (Correctal, ExLax, Doxidan, etc.) can lead to laxative dependence. **Avoid stimulant laxatives** except for rare occasions.
10. **Probiotics** such as Lactobacillus Acidophilus help re-establish the normal bacteria in your gut needed for proper digestion and can help with problems such as constipation, bloating, gas and cramping.
11. After trying all the suggestions above, it is recommended that you **talk to your health care practitioner** so he/she can discuss further treatment such as laxatives (milk of magnesia, magnesium citrate and others), enemas etc.