

Constipation—What You Need to Know

What is constipation?

Constipation means difficulty having a bowel movement.

What is a normal bowel movement?

A normal bowel movement is different for each person. Some people have them 3 times a day while others have them only 3 times a week. A normal bowel movement should be soft, hold its shape and be easy to pass (no straining).

Causes of Constipation

Constipation can be caused by many things, including prescription and nonprescription medications. If you take medication, check with your healthcare provider to see if it could be making you constipated. Constipation is often due to simple factors such as not going to the bathroom when you have the urge.

Tips to Prevent Constipation:

- Drink at least 6–8 glasses (8 ounces or 250 mL each) of water daily.
- Eat a balanced diet that is high in fibre and includes fruit, vegetables and bran. Foods high in fibre include 100% bran cereal, beans, peas, raspberries and broccoli.
- Exercise regularly.
- Try to have a bowel movement at the same time each day. For many people the best time is shortly after breakfast.
- Go to the bathroom when you have the urge; waiting will cause problems. Do not rush; take time to pass the entire stool.

Using Laxatives

The most natural way to regulate your bowels is by eating a healthy diet and following the tips shown above. Sometimes, however, you may need a laxative. The safest laxative for most people is a bulk-forming laxative such as psyllium. It should work within 3 days. If this is too long to wait, other laxatives are available that work more quickly, such as suppositories. Do not use laxatives for more than a week unless your healthcare provider tells you to do this. Talk to your healthcare provider about which laxative is best for you.

When to See Your Healthcare Provider?

If you are constipated *and*:

- You have not had a bowel movement for 7 days, *or*
- You are extremely uncomfortable because you are constipated, *or*
- You have pain in your rectum (back passage) or rectal bleeding, *or*
- You have a fever, your belly hurts or you feel like throwing up, *or*
- Your bowel movements are thin as a pencil, *or*
- You have a problem with your bowels that lasts longer than 2 weeks or keeps coming back.

If you are often constipated, you may find it helpful to keep track of your bowel movements for a few days. You can use a Daily Bowel Log like the one shown below. Try making changes in your diet and the amount of fluid you drink to see if that helps your constipation.

Table 1: Daily Bowel Log

Date	Number of bowel movements and consistency of each (for example hard, soft, loose)	Straining (yes/no)	Complete movement (yes/no)	Fibre and fluid intake (number of glasses juice/water and servings of fibre)	Methods used to treat constipation

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