Intermountain® Healthcare

Constipation

Constipation is when you have fewer bowel movements than you normally do. Stools (poop) become hard and dry and are difficult to pass. This may also cause bloating or cramps in your abdomen.

What's "normal" for bowel movements? It varies from one person to the next. Healthy people can have a bowel movement anywhere from 3 times a day to 3 times a week. What's most important is to know what is normal for **you**. Then you can know when your pattern changes.

Most people have short periods of constipation now and then. And most constipation can be treated at home. This fact sheet will give you ideas for how to treat constipation at home, and when you should see a doctor about it.

A good way to treat constipation is to get plenty of exercise, eat fruits and vegetables, and drink a lot of water. If these don't help, talk to your doctor.

What are the symptoms?

You may be constipated if you:

- Don't have a bowel movement in 3 days
- Feel bloated
- Have abdominal pain
- Have to strain hard to have a bowel movement
- Feel pain while passing hard, dry stools.

What causes constipation?

Most often, constipation is caused by something in your lifestyle. Possibilities include:

- **Certain medications.** Some medications can cause constipation. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if this may the case for you. If it is, the recommendations on this fact sheet should help.
- **Poor diet.** Not enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains, or water. You may also be eating too many animal fats (such as meats or dairy products) or processed foods (such as pastries or fast food).
- **Not enough exercise.** An inactive lifestyle slows down your digestive system.
- **Poor bowel habits.** If you sometimes try to "hold it" or not go to the bathroom as soon as you feel the urge, your body may stop recognizing the signals.
- **Age.** Older adults are far more likely than younger adults to have constipation. This is usually due to the common causes listed above.

Occasionally, constipation is a symptom of **a more serious medical condition**. See the last section of this fact sheet for a list of signs that you should call your doctor.

What can I do about my constipation?

There's a lot you can do on your own to help improve your constipation — and prevent it from returning. Follow the tips below.

- **Eat foods high in fiber.** Fiber helps soften your stool (poop) and moves food through your body more quickly. If you don't think you can eat enough fiber, ask your doctor if you should take a fiber supplement. Foods high in fiber include:
  - **Fruits,** including dried fruits. Good choices are apples and pears (with their skin on), raisins and prunes (dried plums).
  - **Vegetables.** Try eating more sweet potatoes, peas, and spinach.
  - **Whole grains,** such as whole wheat bread, bran, brown rice, and oatmeal.
  - **Beans, seeds, and nuts.** Beans are an excellent source of fiber. Popcorn and almonds are good choices for snack food.
  - **Fiber supplements.** If you're having trouble getting enough fiber in your diet, consider taking a fiber supplement.

  A note about fiber: If you're not used to eating much fiber, high-fiber foods may cause gas or bloating at first. Start slowly and add a little more fiber each day.
- **Drink plenty of water and other liquids.** Try to drink 8 to 10 glasses of water a day. When you eat a lot of fiber, it's important to drink a lot of water along with it. Fiber needs water to do its job.
- **Avoid processed foods** such as white bread, pastries, sausage, fast-food burgers, potato chips, and fries. Choose whole grains instead.
- **Don't skip meals.** Eating regularly helps keep your digestion moving.
- **Go to the bathroom as soon as you feel the urge.** Ignoring your body's signals to have a bowel movement can cause these signals to become weaker over time. So don't wait or hold it in. And when you're in the bathroom, give yourself plenty of time.
- **Exercise regularly.** Exercise helps move stool through the intestines. Try to walk, swim, or do something active for 30 minutes at lease 3 or 4 times a week.

Should I use laxatives?

In general, try to avoid laxatives. Most constipation will improve with the lifestyle changes listed on this page. If you do decide to use a laxative, follow these guidelines:

- **Stool softeners** make stools softer so they are easier to pass. They can help you avoid straining. Don't take them for more than 2 weeks unless your doctor says to.
- **Bulk-forming laxatives** add water to your stools. This makes them bigger so your body is prompted to push them out. These laxatives are generally safe if taken as directed on the label. Don't take them for more than 2 weeks unless your doctor recommends it.
- **Other types of laxatives** work in a variety of ways. If you take the wrong kind, or take them for too long, they can cause other health problems. **Before taking another type of laxative, always check with your doctor** to make sure you're taking the right kind.

When should I call my doctor?

While constipation can often be treated by the recommendations on this fact sheet, sometimes it can't. **Sometimes constipation is caused by a more serious medical problem** that will get worse if left untreated. If your constipation doesn't improve, it's very important to find out what's causing it. Speak with your doctor if you experience any of the following:

- Your symptoms are severe or disabling
- You haven't had a bowel movement in more than 3 days
- You feel nauseated or are vomiting
- You have blood in you stool
- You have other conditions such as unexplained weight loss, fevers, or weakness
- You've been taking a laxative that your doctor recommended for three weeks and are still constipated

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