

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation [kon-stuh-PEY-shuhn] is when you have fewer bowel movements than you normally do. Stools (poop) become hard and dry and are hard to pass. This may also cause bloating or cramps in your abdomen (belly).

Bowel movements are different for each person. Healthy people can have bowel movements anywhere from 3 times a day to 3 times a week. What's most important is to know what's normal for you. Then you can know when your pattern changes.

Most people have a little constipation every once in a while. Most constipation can be treated at home. This fact sheet will give you ideas for how to treat constipation at home, and help you know when you should see a doctor about it.

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 push 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. Possible causes include:

- **Not enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains, or water in your diet.** You may also be eating too many animal fats from meats or dairy products or too many processed foods like pastries or fast food.
- **Not enough exercise.** An inactive lifestyle slows down your digestive system.



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.

- **Certain medicines.** Ask your doctor or pharmacist if this may be the case for you. If it is, the recommendations in this fact sheet should help
- **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 noticing 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 condition. See the last section of this fact sheet for a list of signs that you should call your doctor about.

What can I do about my constipation?

There's a lot you can do on your own to help improve — and even prevent — constipation. Follow these tips:

- Eat foods high in fiber.** Fiber helps soften your stool 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.** Good choices are apples and pears with their skin left on, raisins, and prunes (dried plums).
 - **Vegetables.** Try eating more sweet potatoes, peas, and spinach.
 - **Whole grains.** Good choices are 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 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 each 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** like white bread, pastries, sausage, fast-food burgers, potato chips, and fries. Choose whole grains instead.
- Eat on a regular schedule** to help keep your digestion moving. Skipping meals slows it down.
- Exercise regularly.** Exercise helps move stool through the intestines. Try to walk or do something active for 30 minutes at least 3 to 4 times a week.

- Go to the bathroom when you feel the urge.** Ignoring your body's signals to have a bowel movement can weaken the signals over time. When you're in the bathroom, give yourself plenty of time.

Should I use laxatives?

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

- **Stool softeners** can help you avoid straining during a bowel movement. If you want to take them for more than 2 weeks, discuss it with your doctor.
- **Bulk-forming laxatives** add water to your stools. These laxatives are usually safe if taken as directed on the label. If you want to take them for more than 2 weeks, discuss it with your doctor.
- **Check with your doctor** to make sure you're taking the right kind of laxative. If you take the wrong kind of laxative, or take them for too long, they can cause other health problems.



When should I call a doctor?

Sometimes constipation is caused by a more serious medical problem that will get worse if it isn't treated. If your constipation doesn't improve, it's very important to find out what's causing it. Speak with your doctor if:

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

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