

What I need to know about Constipation



NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH
National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse



U.S. Department
of Health and
Human Services

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What is constipation?

Constipation means that a person has three bowel movements or fewer in a week. The stool is hard and dry. Sometimes it is painful to pass. You may feel “draggy” and full.

Some people think they should have a bowel movement every day. That is not really true. There is no “right” number of bowel movements. Each person’s body finds its own normal number of bowel movements. It depends on the food you eat, how much you exercise, and other things.

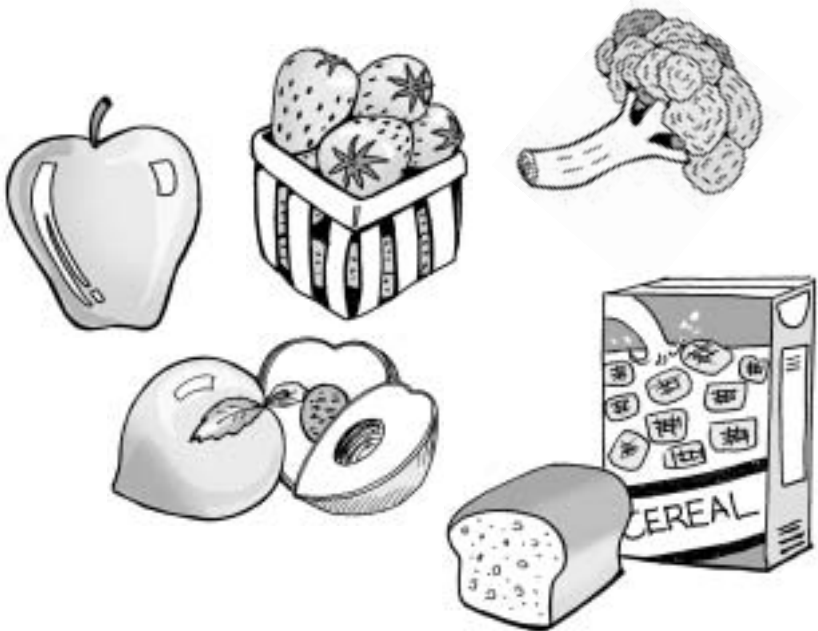
At one time or another, almost everyone gets constipated. In most cases, it lasts for a short time and is not serious. When you understand what causes constipation, you can take steps to prevent it.

What can I do about constipation?

Changing what you eat and drink and how much you exercise will help relieve and prevent constipation. Here are some steps you can take.

1. Eat more fiber.

Fiber helps form soft, bulky stool. It is found in many vegetables, fruits, and grains. Be sure to add fiber a little at a time, so your body gets used to it slowly. Limit foods that have little or no fiber such as ice cream, cheese, meat, snacks like chips and pizza, and processed foods such as instant mashed potatoes or already-prepared frozen dinners. The following chart lists some high-fiber foods.



High-Fiber Foods

Fruit	Vegetables	Breads, Cereals, and Beans
Apples	Acorn squash, raw	Black-eyed peas, cooked
Peaches		
Raspberries	Broccoli, raw	Kidney beans, cooked
Tangerines	Brussels sprouts, raw	Lima beans, cooked
	Cabbage, raw	Whole-grain cereal, cold (All-Bran, Total, Bran Flakes)
	Carrots, raw	Whole-grain cereal, hot (oatmeal, Wheatena)
	Cauliflower, raw	Whole-wheat or 7-grain bread
	Spinach, cooked	
	Zucchini, raw	

2. Drink plenty of water and other liquids such as fruit and vegetable juices and clear soups.

Liquid helps keep the stool soft and easy to pass, so it's important to drink enough fluids. Try not to drink liquids that contain caffeine or alcohol. Caffeine and alcohol tend to dry out your digestive system.





3. Get enough exercise.

Regular exercise helps your digestive system stay active and healthy. You don't need to become a great athlete. A 20- to 30-minute walk every day may help.

4. Allow yourself enough time to have a bowel movement.

Sometimes we feel so hurried that we don't pay attention to our body's needs. Make sure you don't ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.

5. Use laxatives only if a doctor says you should.

Laxatives are medicines that will make you pass a stool. Most people who are mildly constipated do not need laxatives. However, if you are doing all the right things and you are still constipated, your doctor may recommend laxatives for a limited time.

Your doctor will tell you if you need a laxative and what type is best for you. Laxatives come in many forms: liquid, chewing gum, pills, and powder that you mix with water, for example.

6. Check with your doctor about any medicines you take.

Some medicines can cause constipation. They include calcium pills, pain pills with codeine in them, some antacids, iron pills, diuretics (water pills), and medicines for depression. If you take medicine for another problem, be sure to ask your doctor whether it could cause constipation.

Points to Remember

- Constipation affects almost everyone at one time or another.
- Many people think they're constipated when really they aren't.
- In most cases, following these simple tips will help prevent constipation:
 - Eat a variety of foods, especially beans, bran, whole grains, and fresh fruits and vegetables.
 - Drink plenty of liquids.
 - Exercise regularly.
 - Don't ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.
 - Understand that normal bowel habits are different for everyone.
 - If your bowel habits change, check with your doctor.
- Most people with mild constipation do not need laxatives. However, doctors may recommend laxatives for a limited time for people with chronic constipation.
- Medicines that you take for another problem might cause constipation.

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The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) is a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The NIDDK is part of the National Institutes of Health under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Established in 1980, the clearinghouse provides information about digestive diseases to people with digestive disorders and to their families, health care professionals, and the public. NDDIC answers inquiries, develops and distributes publications, and works closely with professional and patient organizations and Government agencies to coordinate resources about digestive diseases.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES
National Institutes of Health



National Institute of Diabetes and
Digestive and Kidney Diseases

NIH Publication No. 04-4157
December 2003