

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation is infrequent or uncomfortable bowel movements. Often the bowel movements are small, hard, or dry.

How does it occur?

You may have constipation because:

- You wait too long to have bowel movements.
- You do not drink enough fluids.
- You overuse laxatives.
- You do not eat enough fiber.
- You don't have enough physical activity.
- You are taking a medicine that has a side effect of constipation.

Some medical conditions and diseases can also cause constipation.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include having:

- small bowel movements
- hard, dry bowel movements
- uncomfortable or painful bowel movements that are hard to pass
- a longer time than usual between bowel movements.

Normal frequencies for bowel movements may vary from 3 times a day to once every 3 days, depending on the person. What's important is whether there is a change in what has been normal for you.

How is it treated?

To ease your constipation:

- Do not delay bowel movements. Make sure that you go to the bathroom whenever you feel that you need to go.
- Drink more fluids.
- Increase the amount of fiber in your diet.
- Increase your physical activity.

Ask your health care provider if any medicines you are taking may be causing constipation.

Tell your health care provider if:

- You start having constipation after years of normal bowel movements.
- You have bouts of constipation alternating with bouts of diarrhea.
- You have pain during bowel movements or for some time afterward.
- Your bowel movements are tar-colored or have blood in them.
- You are losing weight without trying.

How can I take care of myself?

To help take care of yourself:

- Eat fresh vegetables and fruit every day.
- Exercise regularly. For example, walk for 20 minutes every day.
- Drink prune juice or eat stewed fruits at breakfast.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Increase the whole-grain fiber in your diet by eating cereals with 5 or more grams of fiber per bowl (for example, shredded wheat or bran flakes).
- Take a fiber product like Metamucil or Citrucel once or twice a day for several days if you are constipated. If the problem continues, tell your health care provider.
- Avoid using laxatives.
- Avoid using cathartics, which are products that will cause a liquid bowel movement. Cathartics irritate the lining of the intestines.

If necessary, ask your health care provider about giving yourself an enema.

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