

# CONSTIPATION

## BASIC INFORMATION

### DESCRIPTION

Constipation may be defined as having fewer bowel movements than usual and difficulty in passing stools. In most people, constipation is harmless. In some, it can be a sign that something else is wrong with the body. People may think they are constipated when their bowel movements are actually regular. There is no right number of daily or weekly bowel movements. Everyone has different bowel patterns.

### FREQUENT SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- Hard, dry, or lumpy stools.
- Having to strain to have a bowel movement.
- Pain or bleeding with bowel movements.
- Feeling bloated or sluggish.
- Feeling like you still need to go after having a bowel movement.
- May have fewer than 3 bowel movements a week.

### CAUSES

The slow movement of feces (stool) through the large intestine. This results in a dry, hard stool.

### RISK INCREASES WITH

- Constipation can be a symptom or a complication of many different medical disorders.
- Not getting enough fluids.
- Not enough fiber in the diet.
- Being inactive.
- Taking certain drugs (e.g., narcotic drugs for pain).
- Problems with the rectum.
- Laxative abuse.
- Travel-related constipation.
- Advancing age.
- Emotional factors such as depression or anxiety.
- Pregnancy.

### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Eat a well-balanced diet. Include lots of fiber.
- Exercise regularly.
- Drink plenty of fluids every day.

### EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Constipation may go away on its own. In other cases, it is curable with exercise, diet changes, and drinking more fluids. If you have any concerns, see your health care provider.

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Hemorrhoids.
- Fecal impaction (hardened stool that won't pass).
- Anal fissure (tears in skin around anus).
- Chronic constipation.
- Becoming dependent on laxatives. (A person should slowly stop using them. Normal bowel function will begin again in time.).

## DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

## GENERAL MEASURES

Your health care provider may do a physical exam. Questions will be asked about your symptoms, diet, and activities. Medical tests may be done (for severe symptoms, if bowel habits change, or to find a cause).

In most cases, constipation can be helped with changes in diet and lifestyle (such as more exercise). Laxatives are usually not needed for mild constipation.

Treatment will be prescribed for any specific cause. If a drug is the cause, the drug or dosage may be changed.

Make a regular time each day for bowel movements. The best time is often within 1 hour after breakfast. Don't try to hurry. Sit at least 10 minutes, even if a bowel movement doesn't occur.

To learn more: National Digestive Disease Info.; (800) 891-5389; website: [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov).

## MEDICATIONS

Ask your health care provider about using laxatives for a short period of time. Avoid regular use as they can lead to laxative-dependence. Types of laxatives:

Stool softener (softens stools by mixing in fluids).

Bulk-former (adds bulk and water to the stools).

Lubricant (coats the stools so they pass easier).

Saline (draws fluid into bowels to soften stools).

Stimulant (helps the bowel to contract). Avoid these (unless prescribed) as they are more harsh.

Fiber supplements may be recommended.

## ACTIVITY

Get regular exercise and stay physically fit. This helps stimulate the bowel and helps maintain healthy bowels.

## DIET

Drink plenty of fluid each day. Eat a high-fiber diet (beans, bran cereals, raw fruits, and vegetables). Avoid refined cereals and breads, pastries, and sugar.

## NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

Constipation persists despite self-care, especially if the constipation is a change in your normal bowel habits. (Changes in bowel habits may be a sign of cancer.)

You have a fever or severe stomach pain.

Stools are bloody or you pass blood.