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## Constipation

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### Why Am I Constipated?

Constipation is passage of small amounts of hard, dry bowel movements, usually fewer than three times a week. People who are constipated may find it difficult and painful to have a bowel movement. Other symptoms of constipation include feeling bloated, uncomfortable, and sluggish.

Many people think they are constipated when, in fact, their bowel movements are regular. For example, some people believe they are constipated, or irregular, if they do not have a bowel movement every day. However, there is no right number of daily or weekly bowel movements. Normal may be three times a day or three times a week depending on the person. In addition, some people naturally have firmer stools than others.

At one time or another almost everyone gets constipated. Poor diet and lack of exercise are usually the causes. In most cases, constipation is temporary and not serious. Understanding causes, prevention, and treatment will help most people find relief.

### What Causes Constipation?

To understand constipation, it helps to know how the colon (large intestine) works. As food moves through it, the colon absorbs water while forming waste products, or stool. Muscle contractions in the colon push the stool toward the rectum. By the time stool reaches the rectum, it is solid because most of the water has been absorbed. The hard and dry stools of constipation occur when the colon absorbs too much water. This happens because the colon's muscle contractions are slow or sluggish, causing the stool to move through the colon too slowly. Below is a list of the most common causes of constipation.

### Common Causes of Constipation

- Not enough fiber in diet
- Not enough liquids
- Lack of exercise
- Medications
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Changes in life or routine such as pregnancy, older age, and travel
- Abuse of laxatives
- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Specific diseases such as multiple sclerosis and lupus
- Problems with the colon and rectum
- Problems with intestinal function (Chronic idiopathic constipation).



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## Diet

The most common cause of constipation is a diet low in fiber found in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains and high in fats found in cheese, eggs, and meats. People who eat plenty of high-fiber foods are less likely to become constipated.

Fiber--soluble and insoluble--is the part of fruits, vegetables, and grains that the body cannot digest. Soluble fiber dissolves easily in water and takes on a soft, gel-like texture in the intestines. Insoluble fiber passes almost unchanged through the intestines. The bulk and soft texture of fiber help prevent hard, dry stools that are difficult to pass.

On average, Americans eat about 5 to 20 grams of fiber daily, short of the 20 to 35 grams recommended by the American Dietetic Association. Both children and adults eat too many refined and processed foods in which the natural fiber is removed.

A low-fiber diet also plays a key role in constipation among older adults. They often lack interest in eating and may choose fast foods low in fiber.

In addition, loss of teeth may force older people to eat soft foods that are processed and low in fiber.

## Not Enough Liquids



Liquids like water and juice add fluid to the colon and bulk to stools, making bowel movements softer and easier to pass. People who have problems with constipation should drink enough of these liquids every day, about eight 8-ounce glasses. Other liquids, like coffee and soft drinks, that contain caffeine seem to have a dehydrating effect.

## Lack of Exercise

Lack of exercise can lead to constipation, although doctors do not know precisely why. For example, constipation often occurs after an accident or during an illness when one must stay in bed and cannot exercise.

## Medications

Pain medications (especially narcotics), antacids that contain aluminum, antispasmodics, antidepressants, iron supplements, diuretics, and anticonvulsants for epilepsy can slow passage of bowel movements.

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## Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Some people with IBS, also known as spastic colon, have spasms in the colon that affect bowel movements. Constipation and diarrhea often alternate, and abdominal cramping, gassiness, and bloating are other common complaints. Although IBS can produce lifelong symptoms, it is not a life-threatening

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condition. It often worsens with stress, but there is no specific cause or anything unusual that the doctor can see in the colon.

## **Abuse of Laxatives**

Myths about constipation have led to a serious abuse of laxatives. This is common among older adults who are preoccupied with having a daily bowel movement. Laxatives usually are not necessary and can be habit-forming. The colon begins to rely on laxatives to bring on bowel movements. Over time, laxatives can damage nerve cells in the colon and interfere with the colon's natural ability to contract. For the same reason, regular use of enemas can also lead to a loss of normal bowel function.

## **Ignoring the Urge to Have a Bowel Movement**

People who ignore the urge to have a bowel movement may eventually stop feeling the urge, which can lead to constipation. Some people delay having a bowel movement because they do not want to use toilets outside the home. Others ignore the urge because of emotional stress or because they are too busy. Children may postpone having a bowel movement because of stressful toilet training or because they do not want to interrupt their play.

## **Specific Diseases**

Diseases that cause constipation include neurological disorders, metabolic and endocrine disorders, and systemic conditions that affect organ systems. These disorders can slow the movement of stool through the colon, rectum, or anus.

## **How Is Constipation Treated?**

Although treatment depends on the cause, severity, and duration, in most cases dietary and lifestyle changes will help relieve symptoms and help prevent constipation.

### **Diet**

A diet with enough fiber (20 to 35 grams each day) helps form soft, bulky stool. A doctor or dietitian can help plan an appropriate diet. High-fiber foods include beans; whole grains and bran cereals; fresh fruits; and vegetables such as asparagus, brussels sprouts, cabbage, and carrots. For people prone to constipation, limiting foods that have little or no fiber such as ice cream, cheese, meat, and processed foods is also important.

### **Lifestyle Changes**

Other changes that can help treat and prevent constipation include drinking enough water and other liquids such as fruit and vegetable juices and clear soup, engaging in daily exercise, and reserving enough time to have a bowel movement. In addition, the urge to have a bowel movement should not be ignored.

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## Laxatives

Most people who are mildly constipated do not need laxatives. However, for those who have made lifestyle changes and are still constipated, doctors may recommend laxatives or enemas for a limited time. A doctor should determine when a patient needs a laxative and which form is best. People who are dependent on laxatives need to slowly stop using the medications. A doctor can assist in this process. In most people, this restores the colon's natural ability to contract.

## Points to Remember

1. Constipation affects almost everyone at one time or another.
2. Many people think they are constipated when, in fact, their bowel movements are regular.
3. The most common causes of constipation are poor diet and lack of exercise.
4. Additional causes of constipation include medications, irritable bowel syndrome, abuse of laxatives, and specific diseases.
5. A medical history and physical examination may be the only diagnostic tests needed before the doctor suggests treatment.
6. In most cases, following these simple tips will help relieve symptoms and prevent recurrence of constipation:

Eat a well-balanced, high-fiber diet that includes beans, bran, whole grains, fresh fruits, and vegetables.

Drink plenty of liquids.

Exercise regularly.

Set aside time after breakfast or dinner for undisturbed visits to the toilet.

Do not ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.

Understand that normal bowel habits vary.

Whenever a significant or prolonged change in bowel habits occurs, check with a doctor.

7. Most people with mild constipation do not need laxatives. However, doctors may recommend laxatives for a limited time for people with chronic constipation.



## Additional Resources

International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders  
P.O. Box 17864  
Milwaukee, WI 53217  
(414) 964-1799

Intestinal Disease Foundation

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