

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation refers to a change in bowel habits that can include some of these symptoms:

- hard, dry, or lumpy stools
- stools that look like small stones or marbles
- pain and discomfort during bowel movements
- a feeling of being unable to empty the bowels fully
- a loss of appetite due to a continual sense of fullness
- a slightly swollen or bloated belly
- small streaks of bright red blood in the stools or on the toilet paper
- fewer than three bowel movements per week

Causes

Constipation may last for a few days or weeks, or it may be chronic and last for months.

Short-term constipation usually results from lifestyle factors or medication use. Chronic constipation may be related to gastrointestinal, metabolic, or neurological conditions.

A wide variety of medical conditions and lifestyle factors can cause constipation:

- Not enough fiber in diet
- Not enough liquids
- Lack of exercise
- Some 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).

Treatment

If you are struggling with constipation, set up a daily routine with a relaxed time to try to have a bowel movement. After meals is often a good time to try to use the bathroom. Ignoring your body's signals of when you need to have a bowel movement can lead to worsening constipation so try to pay attention to when you need to go.

The following measures can be helpful to relieve constipation

1. **Fiber** – eat more fiber-rich plant foods, including beans, lentils, chickpeas, prunes, prune juice, wheat bran, whole wheat bread/cereals/pasta, broccoli, apples, pears, grapes, kiwis, and berries. Also consider yogurt, kefir, and olive oil
2. **Fluid** – drink plenty of water and other beverages like fruit juice
3. **Exercise** – physical activity, especially aerobic exercise, helps move things along

If you need additional help, a mild laxative like Polyethylene glycol (MiraLax), Milk of Magnesia or Colace can be safe to use but if the constipation does not resolve within a few days or you are having abdominal pain, difficulty eating, weight loss, or fevers, seek evaluation from a clinician.