

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation is a very common condition that happens to almost everyone. It means that you have bowel movements fewer than 3 times a week. Bowel movements can be very hard and sometimes like small pebbles.

Normal bowel movements vary from person to person. For some people, having a bowel movement 3 times a day is normal. For others, 3 times a week may be normal.

Constipation that happens 12 weeks or more out of the year, even off and on, is called chronic constipation.

What is the cause?

You may have constipation because:

- You wait too long to go to the bathroom after you feel the need to go.
- You don't eat enough fiber.
- You don't drink enough fluids.
- You don't get enough exercise.
- You overuse some types of laxatives.
- You are taking a medicine that has a side effect of constipation, such as iron pills, antidepressants, or narcotic pain medicine.

Other possible causes are:

- Pregnancy
- Depression or stress
- Some medical conditions and diseases that can cause a partial blockage in your bowels

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- Small, hard, or dry bowel movements
- Uncomfortable or painful bowel movements that are hard to pass
- A longer time than usual between bowel movements
- Feeling like you have a full bowel

How is it treated?

Most of the time you don't need to see your healthcare provider for treatment. Here are some things you can do to relieve constipation:

- Add more fiber to your diet by eating whole-grain bread and cereal, beans, bran muffins, brown rice, and fresh fruit and vegetables.

- Exercise regularly. For example, if you are able, walk for at least 30 minutes every day. Check with your healthcare provider before you add any new exercise.
- Drink enough liquids each day to keep your urine light yellow in color.
- Go to the bathroom whenever you feel like you need to go. Don't wait.

If taking care of yourself at home does not relieve your constipation, your healthcare provider may be able to help. Your provider may recommend a stool softener or laxative to help you have more bowel movements.

- Stool softeners are medicines that make your bowel movements easier to pass.
- Bulk laxatives, such as fiber supplements, pull water into the bowels. Extra water in the bowel makes the stool larger, softer, and easier to pass.
- Lubricant laxatives, such as mineral oil, keep water in the bowels, which makes the stool softer and easier to pass.
- Stimulant laxatives, such as milk of magnesia and some other laxatives, help the bowel muscles push the stool through the bowel.

Laxatives may be used for a short time. Try not to use them for more than 1 week. Many people find fiber supplements, like Metamucil, Citrucel, or other psyllium products, to be helpful, but sometimes these products can make constipation worse.

Enemas are another way to help you have a bowel movement. Your healthcare provider will tell you how to give yourself an enema if he or she recommends it.

Tell your healthcare provider if:

- You have bouts of constipation switching with bouts of diarrhea.
- You have pain during bowel movements or for some time afterward.
- Your bowel movements are dark or tar-colored or have blood in them.
- You are losing weight without trying.

Tell your healthcare provider about all of the medicines and supplements that you take. Ask if any of the products you are using may be causing constipation.

How can I prevent constipation?

You may be able to prevent constipation by drinking plenty of water; eating fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains; and exercising regularly.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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