

CONSTIPATION

Constipation refers to a change in bowel habits, but it has varied meanings. Stools may be too hard or too small, difficult to pass, or infrequent (less than three times per week). People with constipation may also notice a frequent need to strain and a sense that the bowels are not empty.

Constipation is a very common problem. Each year more than 2.5 million Americans visit their healthcare provider for relief from this problem. Many factors can contribute to or cause constipation, although in most people, no single cause can be found. In general, constipation occurs more frequently as you get older.

DIAGNOSIS

Constipation can usually be diagnosed based upon your symptoms and a physical examination. You should also mention any medications you take regularly since some medications can cause constipation.

Further testing may be ordered in some situations. Testing may include blood tests, imaging tests, sigmoidoscopy, colonoscopy, or other specialized tests.

Generally, constipation and diarrhea are benign conditions. Sometimes, however, they can indicate more serious problems. Consult your doctor if you experience:

- Diarrhea that lasts longer than three days or is accompanied by fever, dizziness or lightheadedness
- Constipation that lasts longer than seven days, despite changes in diet or exercise
- An unexplained change in bowel patterns or habits
- Blood in your stool

CONSTIPATION TREATMENT

Treatment for constipation includes changing some behaviors, eating foods high in fiber, and using laxatives or enemas if needed.

You can try these treatments at home, before seeing a healthcare provider. However, if you do not have a bowel movement within a few days, you should call your healthcare provider for further assistance.

Behavior changes — The bowels are most active following meals, and this is often the time when stools will pass most readily. If you ignore your body's signals to have a bowel movement, the signals become weaker and weaker over time. By paying close attention to these signals, you may have an easier time moving your bowels. Drinking a caffeine-containing beverage in the morning may also be helpful.

Increase fiber — Increasing fiber in your diet may reduce constipation in certain situations. The recommended amount of dietary fiber is 20 to 35 grams of fiber per day. By reading the product information panel on the side of the package, you can determine the number of grams of fiber per serving.

Many fruits and vegetables can be particularly helpful in preventing and treating constipation. This is especially true of citrus fruits, prunes, and prune juice. Some breakfast cereals are also an excellent source of dietary fiber. However, consuming large amounts of fiber can cause

abdominal bloating or gas; this can be minimized by starting with a small amount and slowly increasing until stools become softer and more frequent.

LAXATIVES

If behavior changes and increasing fiber does not relieve your constipation, you may try taking a laxative. A variety of laxatives are available for treating constipation. The choice between them is based upon how they work, how safe the treatment is, and your healthcare provider's preferences.

Constipation treatments to avoid

- Emollients – Emollient laxatives, principally mineral oil, soften stools by moisturizing them. However, other treatments have fewer risks and equal benefit.
- Natural products – A wide variety of natural products are advertised for constipation. Some of them contain the active ingredients found in commercially available laxatives. However, their dose and purity may not be carefully controlled. Thus, these products are not generally recommended.

A variety of home-made enema preparations have been used throughout the years, such as soapsuds, hydrogen peroxide, and household detergents. These can be extremely irritating to the lining of the intestine and should be avoided.

BIOFEEDBACK FOR CONSTIPATION

Biofeedback is a behavioral approach that may help some people with severe chronic constipation who involuntarily squeeze (rather than relax) their muscles while having a bowel movement.