
Constipation

SYMPTOMS

Constipation exists when the following changes persist for at least 3 days:

- Your stools are harder, dryer, and smaller than usual.
- You experience a decrease in the frequency of your bowel movements.
- You feel that your rectum has not completely emptied after a bowel movement (you still feel a slight rectal pressure).
- It is harder than usual for you to have a bowel movement; you have to strain.

Additional Signs for Infants and Children

- Stools change from their usual type. They are less frequent, hard, large, wide, or can range from soft to diarrhea.
- The stomach area may become swollen with gas, causing cramping.
- Straining or pain can occur when having a bowel movement.

GUIDELINES

The following suggestions will help you regain your normal bowel function. Improvement is usually noticed within 3 weeks. If constipation has been your normal pattern for months or years, it may take longer for you to achieve a more comfortable bowel function.

1. Increase your fluid intake to at least eight to ten 8-ounce glasses of fluid each day. Fresh drinking water is an especially good choice.
2. Increase the daily crude fiber in your diet by adding bran, whole- and cracked-wheat cereals, fresh fruits (especially those with skin), fresh vegetables (especially green, leafy vegetables and root vegetables), nuts, prunes, and prune juice.
3. Increase your daily activity with a mild exercise such as walking. The nurse or physical therapist can teach you other exercises that are most suitable for you.
4. Establish a regular time for defecation. Go to the bathroom the same time every day. If you do not have a bowel movement, do not strain. Try again about 30 minutes after your next

meal. In this way, your body develops the habit of having a bowel movement.

5. Drink decaffeinated coffee or tea or hot cocoa 1 hour before the scheduled defecation time. The warm liquid helps relax your bowels and can stimulate a movement.
6. Defecate when you first feel the urge.
7. Spend at least 15 minutes on the toilet. Do not strain. Sit so your thighs can be bent against your abdomen. A footstool can help you achieve this position. Relax while you are sitting on the toilet.
8. Do not routinely use laxatives to help you produce a bowel movement. It is possible for your body to become dependent on them and for you to lose the natural urge to defecate.
9. Do not use enemas, purgatives, and cathartics unless prescribed by your doctor. They can be harmful to your bowels if used incorrectly.

Your doctor has prescribed the following for you:

- Medication/enema: _____

- Directions: _____

- Purpose and side effects: _____

10. If your rectum becomes irritated, cool washcloth compresses and petroleum jelly will ease the discomfort. The nurse can teach you how to give yourself a sitz bath, which will also relieve the irritation.

Additional Guidelines for Infants and Children

1. Diet suggestions for infants
 - If you are nursing, give fruit juices (prune, apple, or pear).
 - If your infant is eating baby food, give fruits and vegetables.
 - Check with your nurse or doctor before making changes.
 - If stools become too loose, give fewer fruits or vegetables.

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- Rice cereal can be constipating; try oatmeal or barley cereal.
2. Diet suggestions for children
 - Be sure your child eats fruits, vegetables, and whole grain cereals every day.
 - Bran cereal may help with constipation.
 - Encourage drinking fruit juices and water between meals; a serving of prune juice daily may help.
 - Check with your nurse or doctor before making changes.
 3. Helping your child with constipation
 - Try to create a relaxed approach to having a bowel movement.
 - Allow enough time, perhaps 10 minutes of sitting on the toilet; use a foot stool to prevent your child's feet from dangling.
- Try to be positive and reward your child for such things as
 - Following diet changes,
 - Using the toilet when he or she has the urge,
 - Trying to sit on the toilet for 10 minutes.
4. Do not give laxatives, an enema, or suppositories unless ordered by your doctor.
 5. Call your nurse or doctor with any of the following:
 - Stomach or rectal pain that continues with the constipation,
 - Constipation that continues for _____ days,
 - Bright red streaks of blood in the stool.

OTHER INSTRUCTIONS
