

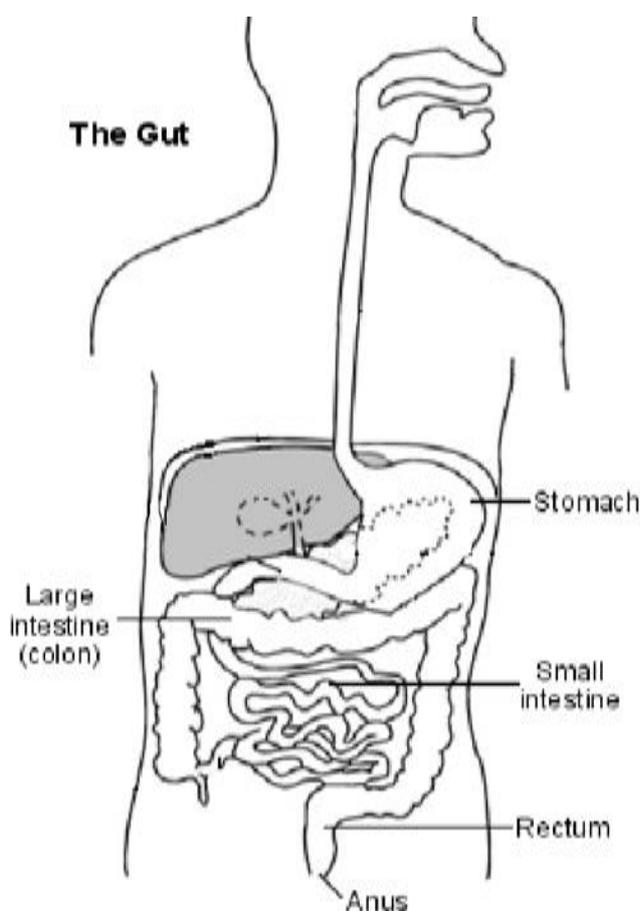
DIETARY ADVICE FOR CONSTIPATION

What is constipation?

Constipation is one of the most common digestive complaints and it can affect people of all ages.

Bowel habits vary from person to person. Some may go more than once a day whereas others may go every three or four days. If you begin to experience fewer bowel motions than usual, this is constipation. Constipation also happens when it becomes difficult to pass bowel motions (stools). They tend to be hard, dry, abnormally large or small in size.

To understand constipation it is important to understand how the bowels work. The diagram below shows the passage through the large intestines otherwise known as the colon.



Digested food is absorbed along the gastrointestinal tract. The waste products left over are the products which form our stools. Muscle contractions in the colon then push the stools towards the back passage, known as the rectum. By the time stool reaches the rectum it is solid, because most of the water has been absorbed in the large intestine.

Constipation may occur if:

1. Muscle contractions in the colon are too slow or weak, causing the stool to move very slowly

2. Too much water is absorbed in the colon making it difficult to push the stools through

The stools may stay in the same place for hours or days and can become hard and dry.

Causes of constipation

- Not enough fibre in the diet
- Dehydration (not drinking enough fluid)
- Immobility or lack of physical activity
- Certain medications
- Inappropriate use of laxatives
- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement (pass stools)
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Having limited privacy when using the toilet
- A change to routine or lifestyle such as altered diet or eating habits
- Stress, anxiety or depression

Constipation can also be caused as a result of illness or surgery which can cause decreased food intake and subsequent reduced bowel movements. Some painkillers are also attributed to constipation. There may also be other underlying medical causes.

Symptoms of constipation

A healthy digestive system plays an important role in maintaining overall health. But unfortunately, busy lifestyles can mean that a change to bowel habits may go unnoticed.

The symptoms may be different from one person to another but constipation can cause one or more of the following:

- Having to strain when going to the toilet
- Abdominal bloating and or discomfort
- Stomach pain, cramps or wind
- Lethargy (feeling tired)
- Loss of appetite
- Headaches
- Nausea (feeling sick)
- Irritability
- Incomplete defecation (unsatisfactory bowel movement)

Preventing constipation



Fibre:

Fibre is the part of some plant foods that is not used by your body and therefore passes through your bowels undigested. This provides bulk to your stools and can prevent constipation. The current recommendations are to consume at least 30g of fibre per day. If you are not eating as much as this, try to increase the amount of fibre in your diet. It is important to slowly increase the amount of fibre in your diet, as making too many changes all at once may cause some people to suffer from wind and bloating.

The table below shows how a variety of foods can be introduced into your diet to meet your daily requirements of 30g of fibre per day:

	Average Portion Size (g)	Amount of Fibre (g)
Cereals		
2 Weetabix	40	3.8
1 Bowl of All Bran	40	9.8
2 Shredded Wheat	45	4.3
1 Bowl of Fruit and Fibre	40	2.8
1 Bowl of Porridge	160	1.4
Bread and pasta		
1 Slice of Wholemeal Bread	36	1.8
1 Slice of Granary Bread	36	1.2
Medium portion of Wholemeal Rice	180	1.4
Medium portion of Wholemeal Pasta	230	8.1
Root vegetables		
Jacket Potatoes with skin	220	5.9
Boiled New Potatoes with Skin	175	2.6
Yams	130	1.8
Fresh and dried fruit		
1 Apple with skin	100	1.8
1 Medium Banana	100	1.1
1 Tablespoon Dried Raisins	30	0.6
6 Prunes without stones	60	3.4
5 Dried Figs	100	7.5
Vegetables, beans and pulses		
Boiled Cabbage	95	1.7
1 Boiled Carrot	80	2.0
Boiled Broccoli	85	2.0
1 Heaped Tablespoon of Red kidney beans	35	2.3
1 Small Can Baked Beans	200	7.4
Sweetcorn	80	2.1
Nuts, seeds and snacks		
Small Bag of Mixed nuts	50	3.0
Quorn pieces	100	4.8
Linseed (flaxseed)	20	5.6
2 Digestive biscuits	30	0.7
1 Wholemeal scone	50	2.6
1 Fruit scone	50	1.0
Drinks		
Orange Juice	200	0.2
Milky Drink: Ovaltine / Horlicks	25	0.6 / 1.0
Tomato juice	200	1.2

Fluid:

It is important that as you increase the amount of fibre in your diet that you also increase the amount of fluid you drink. Fibre adds bulk to your stools and fluid will soften it and make it easier for your colon to push through.

Most healthy adults require about 8-10 glasses or cups of fluid each day. This can be taken as water, tea, coffee, unsweetened fruit juice, squash, milk, (although limit the consumption of caffeine and fizzy drinks). Fluid can also be taken in the form of high water content foods such as fruit, jellies and soups.



Exercise:

Exercise improves muscle function in all parts of the body and even moderate regular exercise such as a daily walk may help to improve bowel function.

Try to fit any form of exercise into your lifestyle such as one or more of the following:

- Walking
- Jogging
- Running
- Swimming
- Aerobics
- Yoga



Try for 30 minutes at least five times a week and avoid long periods of sitting

Some frequently asked questions

Can constipation be serious?

Constipation is rarely a life-threatening condition but because of this it is easy to under-estimate the problems it can cause. These can include significant discomfort as symptoms will often become severe before advice is sought. Medical advice should be sought if you suffer from chronic constipation as it could potentially lead to the increased risk of developing diverticular disease or other bowel problems.

Who is most at risk?

Everyone is likely at some point in their lives to experience constipation. It is one of the most common gastrointestinal complaints and generally affects more women than men. The people most likely to be at risk are:

- Children
- Elderly people

Older adults often experience constipation because the intestinal wall loses strength and elasticity with age, which slows gastrointestinal motility. Some diseases can also affect digestion and absorption which can often lead to malnutrition. Also those

with dentures may be at more risk as they may find it difficult to chew a variety of fibre rich foods.

Do I need to use laxatives?

Most people with mild constipation should try the above advice first and restrict laxatives to severe cases.

Your Doctor may recommend laxatives for a short period of time if you suffer from chronic constipation. It is important to always seek medical advice as your Doctor or pharmacist can help to determine which type of laxative will be the most effective as well as to investigate any underlying cause of your constipation.

Points to remember

In most cases following these simple tips will help to relieve your symptoms and prevent the recurrence of constipation:

- Eat a well-balanced, high fibre diet that includes wholegrain / unrefined foods, fruit and vegetables along with beans, peas, lentils and nuts
- Drink plenty of fluids, aiming for 8-10 glasses per day
- Look at food labels for fibre content
- Exercise regularly
- Do not ignore the urge to have a bowel movement
- Understand that everyone is different and that even normal bowel habits sometimes vary
- **If you have a prolonged or significant change in bowel habits seek advice from your Doctor**

Useful further information

Leicestershire Nutrition and Dietetic Service:

www.lnds.nhs.uk

British Dietetic Association:

www.bda.uk.com

British Society of Gastroenterology:

www.bsg.org.uk

CORE is the working name of the Digestive Disorders Foundation:

www.corecharity.org.uk