

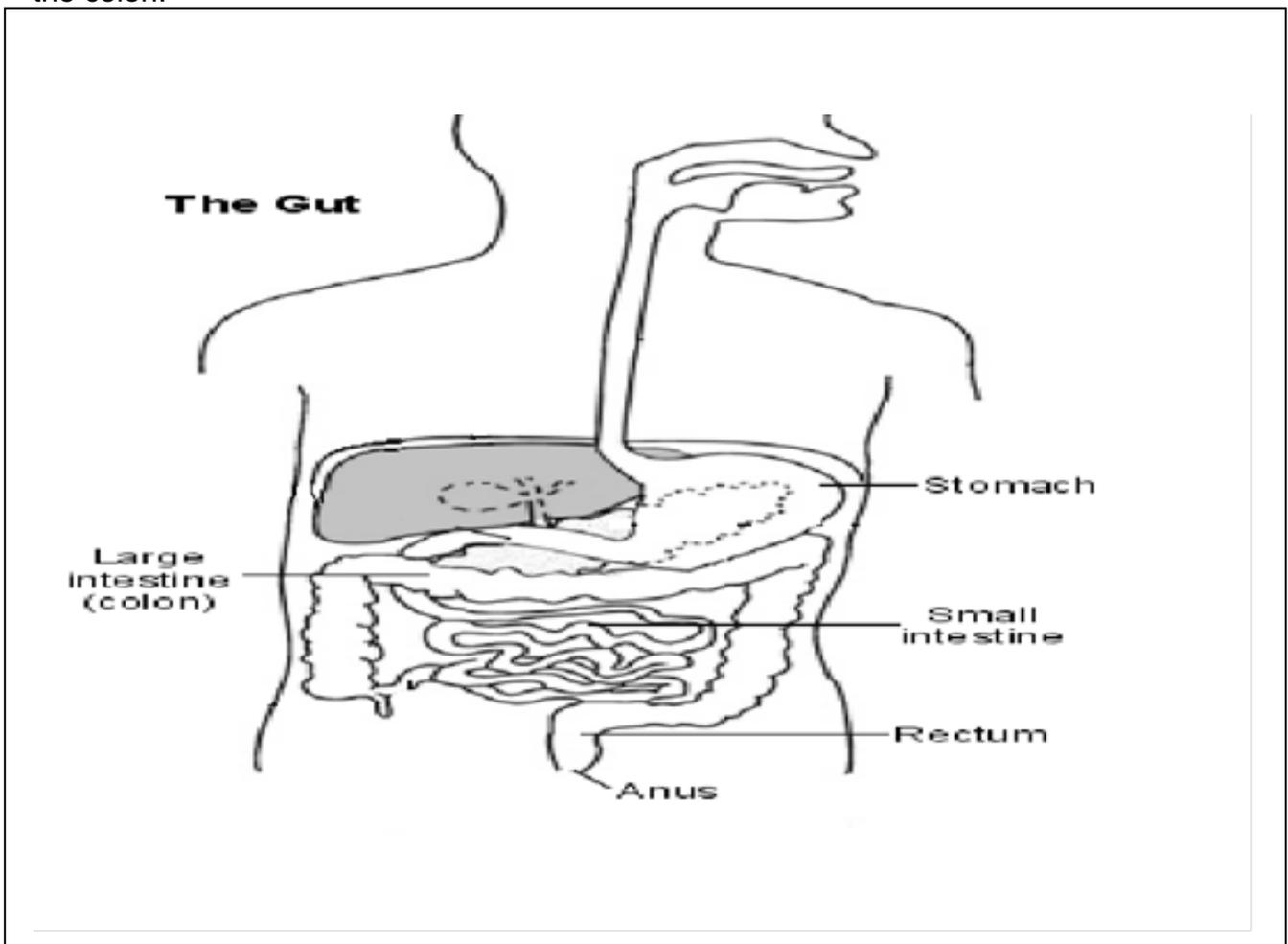
DIETARY ADVICE FOR CONSTIPATION

What is constipation?

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

Bowel habits vary between people. Some people go more than once a day; other people may go every three or four days. If you experience a variation in your routine that means that you go to the toilet less often, 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 that form our stools. Muscle contractions in the colon then push the stools towards the back passage known as the rectum. By the time stools reach 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.

What are the causes of constipation?

Constipation is usually the result of diet and lifestyle including a lack of fibre, fluid and exercise. There may also be other underlying medical causes.

The common causes of constipation are:

- 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 in routine of lifestyle such as change in eating habits

Constipation can also be caused as a result of illness or surgery due to the decreased food intake and reduced bowel movement that generally occurs.

What are the symptoms of constipation?

A good digestive system plays an important part in maintaining a healthy balance in our bodies. But unfortunately, with busy lifestyles, bowel habits can 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 or cramps or wind

- Lethargy (feeling tired)
- Loss of appetite
- Headache
- Nausea (feeling sick)
- Irritability
- Incomplete defecation (unsatisfactory bowel movement)

What can be done to prevent or treat constipation?

If you are suffering with constipation take a look at your current diet and lifestyle. It is essential that you try to increase the fibre content in your diet along with increasing your fluid intake. It is also important to consider physical activity including walking as a factor too.

What is 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)
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
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
Jacket Potatoes with skin	220	5.9
Boiled New Potatoes with Skin	175	2.6
Yams	130	1.8
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

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
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
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. This ensures that the extra bulk of your stool remains soft and easy for your colon to push it through.

It is recommended that all healthy adults drink at least 8-10 glasses of fluid each day. This can be taken as water, tea, coffee, unsweetened fruit juice, squash, milk, and as fizzy drinks (although limit the consumption of caffeine and fizzy drinks).

If you do not drink enough fluid the fibre is not able to become soft and expand therefore the stool will become hard and become difficult to pass.

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 three to five times a week and see if it makes you feel better

Example of a diet once you have introduced a good level of fibre

Remember to gradually introduce fibre into your diet over 2 - 3days.

Breakfast

Porridge with milk and dried fruits on top, wholemeal toast with spread, glass of fruit juice

Mid-Morning

Cup of tea, 1 glass of water plus a banana

Lunch

Large jacket potato, including the skin with cheese and coleslaw or baked beans, tinned fruit, glass of orange juice, water or squash

Mid Afternoon

Cup of tea and a small bag of mixed nuts

Evening Meal

Chicken and mixed vegetable stir fry with rice, blueberry muffin, and 2 glasses of fruit squash

Before Bed

Milky drink

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.

It can cause significant discomfort as frequently the 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 will at some point in their lives 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 foods.

Do I need to use laxatives?

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

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 can help to determine which type of laxative will help you the best as well as 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 breads and cereals, fruit and vegetables along with beans, peas, lentils and nuts
- Drink plenty of fluids, aiming for at least 8-10 glasses per day
- Look at food labels for fibre foods 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