

What is constipation?

Constipation means having a hard, dry bowel motion (faeces) that is difficult to pass. It may cause straining, pain and discomfort. There may be slight bleeding from a small tear in the back passage.

Constipation is common, affecting one in five people. Everyone has different toilet habits. Some people use their bowels a couple of times a day, some once every three days.

As we get older most of us can expect to go less frequently. You are not constipated unless your bowel habits change.

What causes constipation?

There are some common causes of constipation.

- Not drinking enough water.
- A diet low in fibre (roughage).
- A lack of exercise.
- Waiting too long to go to the toilet.
- Pregnancy.
- Older age.
- Medication – including using too many laxatives.
- Chronic illness – including certain bowel conditions and depression.
- Changing routine – travel/work hours.

What are the symptoms?

- Straining and pain on passing a hard bowel motion.
- No bowel movement for several days.
- Cramping stomach pains.
- Bloating and flatulence.
- Not feeling hungry/weight loss.
- Nausea.
- General feeling of ill health.
- Minor bleeding from a tear in the skin around the anus (outside of the back passage).

Treatment

There are a few options, and your doctor will choose the right one for you.

- Laxatives – such as prune juice, Metamucil, Lactulose, Coloxyl, and liquid paraffin help to soften the bowel motion. These are taken by mouth (orally).
- Suppositories – such as glycerine or Duroxax. These are special ‘tablets’ which are inserted into rectum (the back passage).
- Enemas – such as Microlax, this is a special liquid which is inserted into the rectum.

Follow your doctor’s advice with care. Laxatives should only be used for short periods of time, unless otherwise instructed.

Home care

There are some simple measures that can help combat constipation.

- Drink plenty of water.
- Slowly increase the amount of fibre you eat (such as cereals, wholegrain bread, vegetables and fruit). There is little fibre in most ‘junk’ foods.
- Exercise more – begin by going for a brisk 30-minute walk every day, five days a week and increase this as you get fitter.
- Set aside enough time to go to the toilet.
- Go to the toilet when you feel the urge. Do not ‘hold on’.
- Review any medications with your local doctor or pharmacist.

What to expect

While constipation can cause discomfort, most people can be treated with simple measures. A few people may need further tests to look for underlying health problems.

If constipation is ongoing it can lead to haemorrhoids or a hernia. If the bowel becomes too full this may lead to a bowel obstruction that may need hospital treatment.

Prevention

A high fibre intake is a good lifelong habit for everybody. Combine this with plenty of fluids and daily exercise.

Go to the toilet regularly, especially when you feel the urge to.

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Notes:

Follow up with:

Date and Time-

Name-

Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or health care professional if you:

- Have bowel motions that contain blood
- Experience bloating, vomiting or stomach pain
- Increase your intake of fibre and fluids but your constipation does not improve.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional
- Visit Healthinsite
www.healthinsite.gov.au
- Visit the Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

The design and general content of this factsheet are reproduced with the permission of the Victorian Minister for Health, from factsheets that are Copyright © the State of Victoria. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.