Healthy eating with a colostomy

What is a colostomy?
A colostomy is an opening in the belly that connects to part of the large bowel (colon). The opening (called a stoma) is made during surgery. Part of the colon is brought through this opening and is attached to the skin on the belly. A bag is then attached to the skin to collect waste. The anus is no longer the exit for waste.

What are the common reasons for a colostomy?
A colostomy is sometimes required when part of the large bowel, rectum or anus needs to be removed or bypassed. Some conditions which may require a colostomy include bowel cancer, inflammatory bowel disease, diverticular disease or serious injury to the bowel. Depending on why they are needed, colostomies can be temporary or permanent.

Do I have to go on a special diet?
Having a colostomy doesn’t mean you need to be on a special diet! Your body will continue to digest and absorb nutrients normally in your small bowel. People with a colostomy are encouraged to eat a healthy balanced diet, the same as most people.

Enjoy a variety of foods from each of the five food groups:
- Bread, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles
- Vegetables
- Fruit
- Dairy products such as milk, yoghurt and cheese
- Meat, chicken, fish, eggs, tofu or legumes

Do I need to avoid any foods?
No: There are usually no dietary restrictions for people with a colostomy.

Colostomy output
The main job of the colon is to reabsorb fluid and salts back into our body to keep us hydrated. As waste products move through the colon, more and more fluid is absorbed, making the stool firmer and more solid. Initially after surgery your output may be loose or more liquid for a short while. With time, your bowel will adapt and begin to absorb more fluid meaning that your colostomy output will thicken and become more formed.
**Constipation**
Colostomy output will vary from person to person. Some people will have output every day while others may go 2-3 days between movements. Your output will be influenced by a number of factors including your diet, how regular your bowels were before your surgery and how much of your large bowel was removed or bypassed during surgery.

**To prevent constipation**
- Eat regularly and aim to drink 8 – 10 glasses of fluid each day.
- Eat more fruits, vegetables and wholemeal or wholegrain foods.
- You may wish to include pear or prune juice in your diet or speak to your doctor about laxatives.

**Diarrhoea**
Diarrhoea can be caused by a variety of reasons including stress, a stomach bug or medication such as antibiotics. If you experience increased and watery output it is important to increase your fluid intake to prevent dehydration.
- Potatoes, white bread, pasta, rice, oats, tapioca, smooth peanut butter, banana and cheese may decrease and thicken output.
- Alcohol and caffeinated beverages may increase output.

**Wind and odour**
Initially after surgery your stoma may produce more wind than usual but this will usually settle as your bowel adapts. Some foods may increase wind and odour from the stoma. It is important to remember that wind is a normal part of bowel function.
- Cabbage, onions, cauliflower, broccoli, legumes, asparagus, peas, beans and carbonated beverages may increase wind.
- Chewing gum, smoking and drinking through a straw may also increase wind.
- Fish, onion, garlic, leeks and eggs may increase odour.
- Yoghurt and fresh parsley may help to reduce odour.

**Is it normal to see food particles in my bag?**
Yes, some foods are incompletely digested and pass through the stoma unchanged. This may include fibrous foods such as sweet corn. This is quite normal.

**Medication**
If you see undigested pills/medication in your stoma ensure you contact your doctor or pharmacist to discuss this.
Output colour
Some foods may change the colour of your stoma output. This includes brightly coloured food and drinks such as beetroot and red cordial. There is no need to avoid these foods.

Blockages
Blockages can occur if undigested food gets stuck and cannot pass through the stoma. Foods that are most likely to cause a blockage are fibrous, stringy foods when eaten in large serves or not chewed well. This includes fruit and vegetable skins, sweet corn and celery. In the first few weeks after surgery the bowel may still be swollen. During this time introduce these foods in small serves, eat slowly and chew well.

Timing of meals
Meal pattern is very individual, however some people find the timing of their meals can allow for more convenient bag changes.
- Some people find eating a smaller evening meal can reduce the need to empty their bag overnight. If you find this helps you may wish to change your main meal from evening to lunch.
- If you find that smaller meals are better you will need to eat more often to ensure you get enough nutrition over the whole day.

Summary
- There is no special diet for people with a colostomy.
- Have regular meals and eat a normal balanced diet including a variety of foods from each of the five food groups.
- If certain foods don’t agree with you initially, try to reintroduce these foods at a later stage when your bowel has adapted.
- Don’t be afraid to try new foods.
- Aim for 8 – 10 glasses of fluid each day or more if your stool is very loose.

This resource has been developed in consultation with the Queensland Stoma Association - qldstoma.asn.au.