

Healthy eating with a colostomy

This resource will help you understand what a colostomy is and how you can manage the output with diet.

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 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 is removed or bypassed. Some conditions that may lead to 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 in your small bowel. People with a colostomy should eat a healthy balanced diet, the same as most people. Enjoy a variety of foods from each of the five food groups (breads and cereals, vegetables, fruit, meat and alternatives, dairy and alternatives).

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 more solid. After surgery, your output may be loose or more liquid for a short while. With time, your bowel will begin to absorb more fluid so that your colostomy output will thicken and become more formed.

Colostomy output will vary from person to person. Some people will have output every day while others may go 2-3 days between movements. Several factors influence your output, including your diet, how regular your bowels were before your surgery and how much of your large bowel was removed or bypassed during surgery. If a large section of your colon was removed, your stoma is likely to work more often and have a liquid or toothpaste consistency. If most of the colon is intact, the output will be more formed and less frequent.

What should I do if I have constipation?

- Eat regularly and try to drink 8 – 10 glasses of water each day.
- Eat more fruits, vegetables and wholemeal or wholegrain foods. Introduce these foods gradually to avoid problems with wind.
- Try pear or prune juice and speak to your doctor about laxatives if constipation continues.

What should I do if I have diarrhoea?

You may have increased and watery output from a variety of reasons including stress, a stomach bug or medication such as antibiotics.

- Increase your fluid intake or try an oral rehydration solution (e.g. Hydralyte or Gastrolyte) to prevent dehydration.
- Have more potatoes, white bread, pasta, rice, oats, tapioca, smooth peanut butter, banana and cheese – these foods may decrease and thicken output.
- Have less spicy foods, alcohol, sugary drinks, artificial sweeteners and caffeinated beverages – these foods may increase output.

What should I do I have wind or odour?

After surgery your stoma may produce more wind than usual, but this will usually settle with time. Some foods may increase wind or odour from the stoma. It is important to remember that wind is a normal part of bowel function. Only avoid foods that repeatedly cause problems. If the stoma bag fits well, there should be no smell except when changing the bag.

- Cabbage, onions, cauliflower, broccoli, legumes, asparagus, peas, beans, artificial sweeteners and carbonated beverages may increase wind.
- Chewing gum, smoking, drinking through a straw, eating in a hurry or going for long periods without food may also increase wind.

- Fish, onion, garlic, leeks, cheese and eggs may increase odour.
- Yoghurt, cranberry juice 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.

Other helpful hints:

Medication

- Contact your doctor or pharmacist if you see undigested pills/ medication in your stoma bag.

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.

Timing of meals

- Changing the timing of meals can allow for more convenient bag changes. For example, eating a smaller evening meal can reduce the need to empty the 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 day.

Summary

- There is no special diet for people with a colostomy.
- Have regular meals and eat a variety of foods from each of the five food groups.
- If certain foods don't agree with you straight after surgery, try to reintroduce these foods at a later stage.
- Aim for 8 – 10 glasses of fluid each day or more if your output is very loose.

For further information, contact your dietitian or nutritionist: _____