

Preventing Constipation

Signs of constipation are bowel movements that are difficult, painful or less frequent than is normal for you.

Constipation may occur because of:

- Poor fluid intake
- Emotional stress
- Certain illnesses
- A low fiber diet
- Lack of exercise
- Failure to respond to the urge
- Medications, especially those used for pain control or depression
- Chemotherapy treatments

Often, constipation is relieved by choosing high fiber foods, increasing fluids and exercising.

General Guidelines

The following guidelines will help prevent constipation.

Time

Set aside the same time each day to have a bowel movement, especially after breakfast. Respond to the urge right away. You may have to strain if you wait. That is something you need to avoid if you have a heart condition.

Exercise

Exercise each day with your doctor's approval. Walking is great for you. If you are on bed rest, ask if you may do some light exercises in bed.

Fiber

Unless told otherwise, try to include 5 servings a day of fruits and vegetables because they naturally contain fiber. Raw fruits and vegetables with their skins are your best choice. Eat whole grain cereals such as bran or shredded wheat.

Add fiber to your diet slowly along with fluids. If you add too much fiber too quickly, you could have discomfort due to gas and bloating. Once you have added the fiber to your diet, be sure to allow a few weeks for mild gas to subside.

The fiber found in wheat bran, whole grain cereals and breads, corn bread, granola and vegetables and fruits with skin may be the most helpful in preventing constipation.

Eat fiber-rich foods every day to maintain regularity. Beginning on page 4, you will find a list of some fiber-rich foods. Unless told otherwise, 25-38 grams of fiber every day are suggested.

Prune juice acts as a natural bowel stimulant. With chronic constipation, a ½ to one-cup serving of prune juice each day may relieve symptoms.

Fluids

Drink more fluids; at least 8-10 glasses a day. Drinking a warm beverage after a meal may naturally stimulate the urge to have a bowel movement. When you increase the fiber in your diet, you need to drink more fluids since fiber helps relieve and prevent constipation only when you drink enough fluids. As you get older, your body may not tell you to drink enough fluids and you may need to remind yourself to drink plenty of fluids each day. If you drink only when you are thirsty, you may not be drinking enough to help the fiber work for you.

Medications and Treatments

Often, constipation is relieved by eating high fiber foods, increasing fluids and by exercising.

If constipation persists, your doctor, pharmacist or nurse can suggest the best way to treat the problem. Below is a partial list of medicines used to treat constipation; the actions and cautions for each type of medicine are highlighted. If you have any questions about these or any other medications, please ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Take all medications as directed. Some types of laxatives may be habit forming and all can affect the way other medications work. Be sure to talk with your doctor or pharmacist before taking laxatives with any other medicines.

WARNING: Do NOT take ANY laxative product if you have cramps, nausea, vomiting or abdominal pain.

Bulk Forming Laxatives

These products often are the most helpful of all the laxatives in combination with diet, fluids and exercise.

Examples: Metamucil,[®] Fibercon,[®] Citrucel[®]

Action: Adds bulk to the stool and pushes the stool forward, promotes a “normal” bowel movement.

Caution: These agents have very few side effects. **However, do not take these laxatives at the same time as you take other medications.** You must drink additional fluids with these laxatives and should not take them before meals.

Stool Softeners

Examples: Colace,[®] Surfak[®]

Action: Keeps stool soft and easier to pass.

Caution: Generally, these agents provide the least effect and may take several days to soften the stool. **Do not take these agents with any other medications.** Take only on the advice of your doctor.

Mineral Oil

Take this only if advised by your doctor.

Stimulants

Examples: Dulcolax[®], Senekot[®], Ex-Lax[®]

Action: Causes the bowel wall to contract.

Caution: These agents can be used if bulk forming laxatives have no effect. You should check with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before taking them. These agents are the most habit forming and should not be taken every day. Do not take with milk products. These may cause cramps and abdominal pain. Also, results may come on without warning.

Stool Softener and Stimulant Combined

Examples: Peri-Colace[®], Doxidan[®], Dialose Plus[®]

Action: Softens hard stool and stimulates bowel wall.

Caution: May be habit forming and cause cramps. Take only on the advice of your doctor.

Osmotic Laxatives

Examples: Lactulose[®], Golytely[®], Milk of Magnesia[®], Sorbitol[®]

Action: Keeps water in the bowel to soften stool.

Caution: Results may come on without warning. May cause gas, diarrhea and cramping. Take only on the advice of your doctor.

Enema

Example: Fleets[®]

Action: Direct softening and stimulation of stool in the rectum.

Caution: This treatment usually produces quick results. Take only on the advice of your doctor since this treatment may interact with certain cardiac medications and may alter your electrolyte balance.

Suppository

Examples: Glycerin, Dulcolax®

Action: Direct softening and stimulation in the rectum.

Caution: Take only on the advice of your doctor. This treatment may be habit forming and cause cramps.

Fiber-Rich Foods

Fruit	Portion Size	Dietary Fiber (grams)
Orange	1 medium	1.3g
Grapes	1 cup	2.6g
Strawberries	1 cup	2.8g
Papaya	1 medium	2.8g
Blackberries	1 medium	3.3g
Apple	1 medium	3.5g
Pear	1 medium	4.1g
Dates	10 dates	4.2g
Blueberries	1/2 cup	4.4g
Raspberries	1 cup	5.8g

Cereal	Portion Size	Dietary Fiber (grams)
Wheat Germ	2 tablespoons	2g
Quaker® Instant Oatmeal	1 packet	3g
Wheaties®	1 cup	3g
General Mills Basic4®	1 cup	3g
Cheerios/Multi-grain Cheerios®	1 cup	3g
Kellogg's® Low Fat Granola	2/3 cup	3g
Nutri-Grain® Flakes with Raisins	1 cup	4g
Quaker Oats®, dry	1/2 cup	4g
Post® Fruit and Fiber	1 cup	4g

Cereal	Portion Size	Dietary Fiber (grams)
Healthy Choice® Multigrain Cereal with Oat Clusters and Raisins	1 cup	4g
Grape-Nuts®	1/2 cup	5g
Total® Raisin Bran	1 cup	5g
Post® Raisin Bran	1 cup	8g
100% Bran	1/3 cup	8g
Kellogg's® All Bran	1/2 cup	10g
Kellogg's® All Bran with Extra Fiber®	1/2 cup	15g
Flax Seed	1 Tbsp	3g

Vegetables	Portion Size	Dietary Fiber (grams)
Cauliflower	2 cups	2g
Broccoli	1 cup	2g
Brussels Sprouts	1 cup	2.2g
Winter Squash	1 cup	2.4g
Corn	1 medium	3.4g
Mixed Vegetables (canned/frozen)	1 cup	4.2g

Dried Beans and Peas	Portion Size	Dietary Fiber (grams)
Black-Eyed Peas	1/2 cup	2.2g
Navy Beans	1/2 cup	3.3g
Pork-n-Beans/Baked Beans	1/2 cup	3.5g
Pinto Beans	1/2 cup	3.4g
Black Beans	1/2 cup	3.6g
Lentils	1/2 cup	3.9g
Lima Beans	1/2 cup	3.9g
Great Northern Beans	1/2 cup	4.9g
Vegetarian Refried Beans	1/2 cup	6g
Garbanzo Beans (Chickpeas)	1/2 cup	6g
Kidney Beans	1/2 cup	7.3g

Others	Portion Size	Dietary Fiber (grams)
Microwave Popcorn	1/2 cup	2.2g
Tofu	1/2 cup	3.3g

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the new Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nmh.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.

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