

# Constipation

**Constipation means being unable to empty your bowel (pass a bowel motion) as often or as easily as you normally do. Constipation is very common, and can be well managed with diet, exercise and medicines.**

Normal, healthy bowel emptying can be different for everyone. For example, for some people it can be two or three times a day and for others it can be two or three times a week. If you can't empty your bowels as often as usual or your bowel motions (stools, faeces, poo) are hard to pass, you may have constipation.

## Signs and symptoms

Some symptoms of constipation are:

- passing a bowel motion less often than normal
- less than three bowel movements a week
- straining or discomfort when trying to pass a bowel motion
- hard, dry, lumpy bowel motions
- feeling your bowel is not fully empty after passing a bowel motion
- feeling bloated
- nausea, poor appetite
- feeling irritable.

Most people have short times of mild constipation. Some people have severe or persistent (chronic) constipation. Severe and persistent constipation can cause problems such as faecal impaction (rectum is plugged with dry, hard faeces) and faecal incontinence (liquid faeces leak from rectum).

## Causes

A number of factors can cause or worsen constipation, such as:

- not eating enough foods that contain fibre
- not drinking enough water
- losing body fluid (e.g. sweating a lot)
- not exercising regularly or being less active than normal
- putting off passing a bowel motion
- a change in diet, daily routine or lifestyle
- pregnancy

- hormone changes around the start of menstruation (periods)
- increasing age
- stress
- some medical conditions (e.g. irritable bowel syndrome, depression, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, thyroid disorder, bowel cancer)
- some medicines (e.g. iron, calcium, some antacids, opioids, antidepressants, verapamil).

Healthy children can have problems with constipation, especially while toilet training.

## Self care

- Eat foods with plenty of fibre (e.g. fruit, vegetables, wholegrain/ wholemeal foods, seeds). Increase the amount of fibre in your diet slowly, to help prevent bloating and wind.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises you not to).
- Do at least 150 minutes of moderate level physical activity each week, to help your abdominal muscle tone. If you are not able to move about, it may help to sit up instead of lying down.
- Do not ignore the urge to pass a bowel motion.
- Try a routine visit to the toilet first thing in the morning or soon after eating, as your gut muscles are most active at those times.

- Learn and use relaxation techniques to manage stress.
- Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice if a medical condition or medicine makes you constipated.

Note: Sitting position on the toilet can affect bowel function. It is best to lean forward with a straight back, and with your feet flat on the floor or on a foot-stool, so that your knees are above your hips.

## Medicines

Medicines are sometimes needed to help relieve or prevent constipation. Most medicines for constipation are called laxatives.

There are several different types of laxatives and they are available in several different forms (e.g. powder, granules, tablets, syrups, rectal suppositories and enemas). Different laxatives have different actions in the bowel and also differ in how quickly they work. The choice of a laxative product depends on how severe the constipation is, the cause of the constipation and the age of the constipated person. Side effects of some laxatives include stomach pain, wind and bloating. You can buy laxatives from a pharmacy without a doctor's prescription. Ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice about laxatives.

## The main types of laxatives

**Bulk forming laxatives** (fibre supplements such as sterculia, ispaghula, psyllium) – increase bulk and water in faeces, which makes the faeces bigger and softer. This helps faeces to pass through the bowel easily. Most fibre supplements must be taken with plenty of water.

**Osmotic laxatives** (e.g. macrogol, glycerol, lactulose, sorbitol, magnesium sulfate, sodium phosphate and sodium citrate) – increase the amount of water in the bowel and faeces, which makes the faeces bigger and softer. This helps faeces to pass through the bowel easily.

**Stimulant laxatives** (e.g. bisacodyl, senna, frangula bark, sodium picosulfate) – increase the activity of bowel muscles.

**Stool softeners** (e.g. docusate, liquid paraffin, poloxalkol) – soften faeces, making them easier to pass. Stool softeners are mild laxatives and often combined with other laxatives.

## Important

Everyone has their own bowel habit (pattern for emptying their bowel) and constipation means different things to different people. Constipation can sometimes be a symptom of a more serious condition.

Get medical advice if:

- your normal bowel habit changes suddenly, especially if you are over 50 or have a family history of bowel disease or cancer
- you get constipation that alternates with diarrhoea
- bowel motions are painful to pass
- bowel motions have blood stains, or look black and tar-like
- you need to use laxatives often (e.g. every 2-3 days or more often)
- you have constipation with other symptoms (e.g. tired, unwell, vomiting, weight loss, headaches, fever)
- you have constipation for more than 2 weeks or have not emptied your bowel for more than 7 days
- liquid or soft faeces leak out of your anus.

## For more information

### Continence Foundation of Australia

Phone: 1800 330 066

Website: [www.continence.org.au](http://www.continence.org.au)

### Australian Dietary Guidelines

Website: [www.eatforhealth.gov.au](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au)

### Dietitians Australia

Website: [www.dietitiansaustralia.org.au](http://www.dietitiansaustralia.org.au)

### Gastroenterological Society of Australia

Website: [www.gesa.org.au](http://www.gesa.org.au)

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.gov.au](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au)

### NPS MedicineWise

#### Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets

### Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.***

***Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.***

## Related Fact Cards

- » *Fibre and bowel health*
- » *Haemorrhoids*
- » *Irritable bowel syndrome*
- » *Opioids for pain relief*
- » *Pain relievers*
- » *Pelvic floor exercises*
- » *Relaxation techniques*

## Your Self Care Pharmacy:

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