

Constipation

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is constipation?

Constipation is the most common gastrointestinal complaint in the U.S. People who experience constipation have infrequent bowel movements, pass hard stools, or strain during bowel movements. What's considered normal frequency for bowel movements varies widely. In general, you're probably experiencing constipation if you pass fewer than three stools a week and your stools are hard and dry. Fortunately, most cases of constipation are temporary. Comfortable patterns of elimination are dependent on a balanced diet and exercise.

What causes constipation?

- Inadequate fluid intake or dehydration
- Diets low in fiber
- Inattention to bowel habits or ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Lack of physical activity
- Changes in lifestyle or routine, e.g. travel, especially to areas where bathrooms are unfamiliar, or not available when needed
- Illness
- Laxative abuse
- Pregnancy
- Use of certain drugs such as iron, calcium, antacids with aluminum or calcium, antidepressants, or cough suppressants
- An underlying disease (e.g. low level of thyroid hormone, diabetes, or depression)
- Hemorrhoids or anal fissures, which can produce a spasm of the anal sphincter muscle, interfering with stool passage

When should I see a medical provider?

- If constipation is a new problem.

- If you also have abdominal pain.
- If associated with weight loss, fevers, or weakness.
- If your stools are black (be aware, the use of Pepto-Bismol or iron may cause black stools; this is expected)
- If you need to use laxatives regularly.
- If you see significant blood in your stool.
Note: Bright red blood in small amounts is often seen with the passage of hard stools. This may be caused by irritation to the tissue around the rectum and is generally not serious in nature. If persistent, recurrent, or large in quantity, see your provider.

How is constipation treated?

- Increase your activity. Get 30 minutes of exercise each day.
- Establish a convenient, uninterrupted time for a bowel movement each day. Bowel activity and mobility is greatest about 15 to 20 minutes after breakfast, so this may be the best time. If the urge to have a bowel movement is ignored, the stool becomes increasingly dry and hard, and constipation is almost inevitable, or worsens. Straining is not recommended because it can cause a tightening of muscles that should actually be relaxed during a comfortable bowel movement.
- Drink 8 glasses of liquid a day, especially water.
- Gradually increase the fiber in your diet. The American Dietetic Association recommends eating 20 to 35 grams of fiber a day. The fiber acts like a large sponge in

the bowel because it holds water and keeps waste moving. For breakfast each day you can try bran cereal and fruit. Raw vegetables and fruit, grains, beans, and cereals all contain adequate amounts of fiber. Remember — you have to drink liquids for fiber to work. See the high fiber list.

- If dietary and exercise efforts fail, a fiber supplement product (in pill or powder form) can be used to increase bulk in your stool. Examples of fiber products are Metamucil (psyllium), Citracel, or other generics, taken per package directions with plenty of fluids. Start with small amounts of fiber supplements and increase slowly as large amounts introduced too quickly may cause increased gas for some.
- Sometimes a laxative may be helpful, but if you are considering this, see your provider for advice. Regular use of laxatives can interfere with establishing a normal pattern of bowel movements.

When can I expect normal bowel movements?

It takes patience and a change in diet and lifestyle to solve constipation - there is no quick and easy answer. It may take 4 to 6 weeks to re-establish normal bowel function, especially if laxatives have been used on a regular basis.