

Self-care information on...

Constipation



What is constipation?

Constipation is a common condition. It means either going to the toilet less often than usual to empty your bowels, or passing hard or painful stools (also called faeces, motions or poo).

It is a **change** from your usual pattern that may mean you are constipated.

The severity of constipation varies from person to person. Many people only experience constipation for a short time, but for others, constipation can be a chronic (long-term) condition.

What causes constipation?

It is often difficult to identify the cause of constipation. However, there are a number of things that increase the risk of constipation, including:

- Not eating enough fibre, such as fruit, vegetables and cereals
- A change in your routine or lifestyle
- Having limited privacy when using the toilet
- Ignoring the urge to pass stools
- Immobility or lack of exercise
- Side effects of certain medication such as codeine and iron supplements
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Anxiety or depression
- Pregnancy

In children, poor diet, fear about using the toilet and poor toilet training can all be responsible.

What are the signs and symptoms of constipation in children?

- Infrequent or irregular bowel movements
- Loss of appetite
- Lack of energy or generally feeling unwell
- Being irritable, angry or unhappy
- Foul-smelling wind and stools
- Abdominal pain and discomfort
- Soiling their clothes.

If your child has these symptoms or has spoken to you about having difficulty passing stools, speak to your GP practice.

What can you do to help prevent constipation?

You may be able to help prevent or ease constipation yourself by making simple changes to your diet and lifestyle:

- Eat foods that contain plenty of fibre. High-fibre foods include wholemeal or wholegrain bread, flour and breakfast cereals, and fruit and vegetables.
- Drink plenty of fluids. You should aim to drink at least two litres (about 8-10 glasses) of non-alcoholic fluid per day. This is particularly important if you are increasing your fibre intake.
- Exercise regularly, if possible. This helps to keep your gut moving.
- Allow yourself enough time and privacy to pass stools comfortably and never ignore the urge to go to the toilet.

How do you treat constipation?

In many cases you can improve the symptoms of constipation through making simple lifestyle changes – see ‘What can you do to help prevent constipation?’

Treatment with a laxative (a type of medicine that can help you empty your bowels) is only needed if lifestyle measures do not work. Laxatives should not be used to prevent constipation. You can buy laxatives from pharmacies, supermarkets or local shops.

There are four main groups of laxatives that work in different ways. Ask your pharmacist which laxative is most suitable for you.

Bulk-forming laxatives (also known as fibre supplements)

- These work in the same way as dietary fibre; they increase the bulk of your stools by helping your stools retain fluid.
- It is important to drink plenty of fluids when taking this type of laxative.
- They take two to three days to work.
- Examples include ispaghula husk.

Stimulant laxatives

- These work to speed up the movement of your bowel, helping to push the stool along your gut.
- They take six to eight hours to work.
- Examples include senna and bisacodyl.

Osmotic laxatives

- These make your stools softer by increasing the amount of water in your bowels.
- They take two to three days to work.
- Examples include lactulose, macrogols.

Stool softener laxatives

- These add water to your stools to lubricate them, making them more slippery and easier to pass.
- They take one to two days to work.
- Examples include docusate.

Laxatives should be stopped once the stools become soft and easily passed again.

When to contact your GP practice

- If your constipation does not resolve after 6 weeks.
- If symptoms are very severe and not helped with laxative medication.
- If it is a child who you suspect of being constipated (you could also talk to your health visitor).
- If you are pregnant (you could also talk to your midwife).
- If other symptoms develop or are already present, e.g.
 - * passing blood or mucous from your bowel
 - * weight loss
 - * bouts of diarrhoea
 - * night-time symptoms
 - * a family history of colon cancer or inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis)
 - * unexplained symptoms in addition to constipation

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: www.nhs.uk
- Patient UK www.patient.co.uk

