



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Constipation

Everyone has their own usual bowel habit. Constipation means being unable to open the bowels and pass a motion as easily or as often as usual and is often accompanied by hard, dry stools (faeces, motion, poo). It is very common, and can be well managed with diet, exercise and medicines.

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms associated with constipation include:

- Straining to pass a bowel motion
- Discomfort when trying to pass a bowel motion
- Less frequent bowel motions than usual
- Stools that are harder, drier or lumpier than usual
- Stomach cramps or bloating
- Discomfort or pain in the lower back or stomach
- A sense of incomplete emptying of the bowel
- Nausea, irritability, decreased appetite.

Causes

A number of things can cause constipation or increase a tendency to become constipated, including:

- Not eating enough fibre-containing foods (e.g., wholegrains, fresh fruit and vegetables)
- Not drinking enough water
- Losing body fluid (e.g., excessive sweating)
- Not exercising regularly or being less active than usual
- Delaying passing a motion
- A change of diet, daily routine or lifestyle
- Pregnancy, especially in the third trimester
- Hormone changes around the start of a woman's menstrual period
- Increasing age
- Stress

- Some medical conditions (e.g., depression, Parkinson's disease, thyroid disorder)
- Some medicines (e.g., iron, calcium, pain relievers, antidepressants)
- Bowel cancer or other bowel conditions (e.g., Irritable Bowel Syndrome)
- Inappropriate use of laxatives.

Self care

- Include plenty of fibre in your diet (e.g., fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and seeds). Increase the amount of fibre in your diet gradually, to help avoid bloating and wind.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises otherwise).
- If possible, exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week, to help develop and maintain good abdominal muscle tone. If you are not able to move about, it can help to sit up instead of lying down.
- Do not ignore the urge to pass a bowel motion.
- Visit the toilet soon after meals, when intestinal muscles are the most active.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to relieve 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 well forward with a straight back and with feet supported.

Medicines

Laxative medicines are sometimes necessary in addition to 'self care' strategies. Laxatives can be used to relieve and to prevent constipation. There are several different types of laxatives and they are available in several different forms, (e.g., granules, tablets, syrups, rectal suppositories and enemas). The choice of a laxative product depends on how severe the constipation is, its cause and the age of the constipated person. Adverse effects of laxatives include abdominal pain, wind and bloating. Ask your pharmacist or doctor for advice about laxatives. The main types of laxatives are:

- **Bulk-forming laxatives** (fibre supplements) (e.g., ispaghula, guar gum, psyllium, sterculia) that increase bulk and water in the stools. Most fibre supplements need to be taken with plenty of water.
- **Osmotic laxatives** (e.g., glycerol, lactulose, macrogols, sorbitol, magnesium citrate, phosphate, sulfate,) that draw water into the stools, expanding and softening them.
- **Stimulant laxatives** (e.g., bisacodyl, senna, sodium picosulfate) that increase the activity of the bowel muscles.
- **Stool softeners** (e.g., docusate, liquid paraffin, poloxalkol) that soften stools, making them easier to pass. They are mild laxatives that can be helpful for children.

Note: Some types of laxatives can be habit-forming and should only be used for short periods of time. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Related fact cards

- *Fibre and Bowel Health*
- *Haemorrhoids*
- *Irritable Bowel Syndrome*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Pelvic Floor Exercises*
- *Relaxation Techniques*

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Important

Every one has a different bowel habit and constipation means different things to different people. Constipation can sometimes be a symptom of a more serious condition.

Consult a doctor if:

- Your usual bowel habit changes suddenly, especially if you are over 40
- You get alternating constipation and diarrhoea
- Bowel motions are painful to pass
- Stools are bloodstained or black and tar-like
- You need to use laxatives regularly (e.g., every 2-3 days)
- You feel tired, unwell, are vomiting, have lost weight, have headaches, or have a fever
- You have had symptoms of constipation for more than seven days, with no obvious cause
- Liquid or soft stool leaks out of the anus.

For more information

A doctor – listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

A dietitian or the Dietitians' Association – listed under 'D' in the white pages the phone book or www.daa.asn.au

Gastroenterological Society of Australia – website www.gesa.org.au

HEALTH/Insite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

The Gut Foundation – phone (02) 9382 2749 or website www.gut.nsw.edu.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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