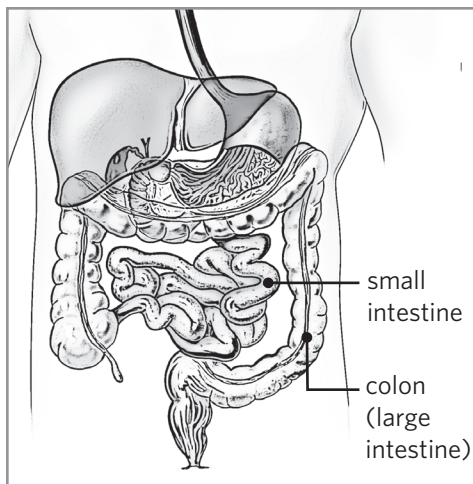


Constipation



If you have constipation, you may not have regular bowel movements, or your bowel movements could be painful and hard to pass. When your digestive system is running smoothly, your small intestine absorbs nutrients and sends the leftover waste and water to your colon (large intestine). The muscles in your colon contract to push this waste to your rectum and out of your body.

If you're constipated, your colon takes out too much water. And your colon's contractions are slow. Both of these can make your stool hard, dry and difficult to pass.

Most people have constipation at some point during their lives. Although you may feel uncomfortable, constipation is usually not serious. And you can often treat it by making changes to your diet and lifestyle. If your constipation is ongoing, it's important to work with your doctor to figure out what's causing it, so you can make changes and treat it.

Symptoms

There isn't a normal number of bowel movements to have in a day or week. It's different for everyone. Anywhere from three times a day to three times a week is considered healthy.

If you have constipation, you may have some of these signs:

- **going more than three days between bowel movements** or having less than three movements a week
- **straining** or having trouble pushing stool out
- **feeling like you haven't completely emptied your bowel**
- **bloating**
- **stool that is hard, dry or small**

If you have symptoms for longer than three weeks or if your symptoms are interrupting your life, see your doctor. The straining of long-term constipation can lead to more serious conditions in your colon and rectum.

Causes

Constipation can be caused by:

- **A low-fiber diet**—Fiber helps move waste through your intestines so you have regular bowel movements. Without it, your bowels become sluggish. A diet high in animal fats (from meat and dairy) or sugar can also cause constipation.
- **Not drinking enough**—Too little fluids can cause dry, hard stools. Drinks with alcohol and caffeine can also dehydrate you, making the problem worse.
- **Lack of exercise**—Physical activity helps keep your bowels working as they should.
- **Ignoring the urge**—Not going to the bathroom when you feel the urge, or regularly trying to hold in bowel movements can lead to constipation.
- **Laxative abuse**—Taking laxatives too often or for too long can disrupt the normal contractions in your colon, so your body becomes dependent on them to have a bowel movement.
- **Medicines**—Many common medicines can make you constipated, including narcotic pain relievers, antidepressants, iron supplements and certain antacids and blood pressure medicines. If you think your medicine is making you constipated, see your doctor. Don't stop taking any medicine without talking to your doctor first.
- **Other conditions**—Stroke, Parkinson's disease, lupus, nerve damage, thyroid conditions, and pregnancy, among others, can lead to constipation.

Your doctor will help you figure out what's causing your constipation, so you can make changes to prevent it (*see other side*).

(continued on other side)



To learn more, visit:

- **American Gastroenterological Association**
www.gastro.org
- **National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse**
www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov

This PatientPoint® handout may be reproduced for patient use and is provided courtesy of your doctor:

Lifestyle Changes and Treatment

Your doctor will recommend treatment based on the cause of your symptoms, how long you've had symptoms and how severe they are. Treatment options include:

- **Changes to your diet**—Make sure you get 20 to 35 grams of fiber a day and drink plenty of liquids. You'll know you're drinking enough if your urine is colorless to slightly yellow. Talk to your doctor about how you can include more fiber in your diet (*see below*).
- **Exercise**—Be active to help get and keep your digestive tract moving. To begin, try walking for 10 minutes, three times a day.
- **Practice healthy bowel habits**—Give yourself enough time to go to the bathroom without feeling rushed. Also, don't ignore the urge, even if you are busy or in a public restroom.
- **Treat other health conditions**—If another medical condition is making you constipated, work with your doctor to treat it. If constipation is a side effect of a certain medicine, your doctor might try lowering your dose or prescribing a different medicine.
- **Laxatives**—If other treatments don't help, ask your doctor about taking a laxative. Your doctor can help you decide if you need a laxative and, if so, which type is best for you. Laxative use can be harmful, so be sure to ask your doctor before using them.

Fiber Tips

Adding more fiber to your diet is one of the best things you can do to help constipation. Here are a few tips to get started:

- **Eat more whole grains.** Swap white bread, buns and tortillas with whole-wheat. Choose brown rice and whole-wheat pasta.
- **Have fruit with every meal.** Try berries on your cereal, or pears as a lunch or dinner side.
- **Eat more beans.** You can add them to soups, salads and casseroles.
- **Makeover your breakfast.** Have oatmeal or bran flakes, instead of doughnuts or corn flakes.
- **Snack on nuts and seeds.**

Be sure to drink plenty of water and add fiber to your diet slowly. If you do it all at once, it can make constipation worse and cause gas.

Remember:

- Don't ignore constipation. Talk to your doctor if you have problems with constipation on a regular basis (for more than three weeks).
- Drink plenty of water, and slowly increase how much fiber you eat to help with constipation.
- Take laxatives only if your doctor recommends them.