

Constipation

WHAT IS CONSTIPATION?

Constipation means having a hard, dry bowel motion (poo) that is difficult to pass. It may cause straining, pain and discomfort. There may be slight bleeding from a small tear in the anus (outside of the back passage).

Constipation is common, affecting one in five people.

Everyone has different toilet habits. Some people use their bowels a couple of times a day to once every three days or so. As we get older most of us can expect to go less frequently.

You are not constipated unless your bowel habits change.

WHAT CAUSES CONSTIPATION?

- Not drinking enough water
- A diet low in fibre (roughage)
- A lack of exercise
- Waiting too long to go to the toilet
- Pregnancy
- Older age
- Medication – including using too many laxatives and taking strong pain medications
- Chronic illness – including certain bowel conditions and depression
- Changing routine – travel/work hours

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Straining and pain on passing a hard bowel motion
- No bowel movement for several days
- Cramping stomach pains
- Bloating and flatulence
- Nausea

- General feeling of ill health
- Minor bleeding from a tear in the skin around the anus (outside of the back passage)

TREATMENT

There are a few options, and your doctor will choose the right one for you.

- **Laxatives** such as prune juice, Metamucil, Lactulose, Coloxyl, Movicol and liquid paraffin help to soften the bowel motion. These are taken by mouth (orally).
- **Suppositories** such as glycerol or Dulcolax are inserted into the rectum (into the back passage).
- **Enemas** such as Microlax, which is a special liquid inserted into the rectum.

Follow your doctor's or health professional's advice with care. Laxatives should only be used for short periods of time, unless otherwise instructed.

HOME CARE

There are some simple measures that can help combat constipation:

- Drink plenty of water.
- Slowly increase the amount of fibre you eat (such as cereals, wholegrain bread, vegetables and fruit). There is little fibre in most 'junk' foods.
- Exercise more. Begin by going for a brisk 30-minute walk every day, five days a week and increase this as you get fitter.
- Set aside enough time to go to the toilet.
- Go to the toilet when you feel the urge. Do not 'hold on'.
- Review any medications with your local doctor or pharmacist.

- Raise knees above hips when sitting on the toilet by placing feet on a foot stool.

WHAT TO EXPECT

While constipation can cause discomfort, most people can be treated with simple measures. A few people may need further tests to look for underlying health problems.

If constipation is ongoing it can lead to haemorrhoids (swollen veins of the rectum or anus), a hernia (caused by organs such as the intestine pushing through a weak section of the abdominal wall/muscles) or an anal fissure (a small tear in the lining of the anus).

PREVENTION

A high fibre intake is a good lifelong habit for everybody. Combine this with plenty of fluids and daily exercise. Go to the toilet regularly, especially when you feel the urge to.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

See your local doctor or healthcare professional if you:

- have bowel motions that contain blood
- experience bloating, vomiting or stomach pain
- increase your intake of fibre and fluids but your constipation does not improve.

For other medical problems or any concerns see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email

emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

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