

Dos and Don'ts: Constipation Prevention and Self-Care

What is constipation?

- Although there are many different meanings, constipation often refers to a change in bowel movement (BM) pattern. More specifically a decrease in frequency of bowel movements (less than 3 bowel movements per week) or difficulty passing stool. People with constipation often strain and feel their bowels are never fully empty. It is important to note that frequency of bowel movements differs from person to person. Some individuals may have multiple BMs daily whereas other individuals may have one BM every couple of days. The important thing is to note any change in your 'normal' bowel routine.
- The diagnosis of constipation is made based on symptoms and physical exam performed by a medical professional. Invasive investigations, such as scopes that examine inside your bowels, are rarely needed. It is important to inform your health care provider of all your symptoms in order to rule out other possible medical issues.

What causes constipation?

Medication side effect

- Pain killers (opiates)
- Calcium, iron supplements
- Laxative overuse

Diet or lifestyle related

- Travel
- Inadequate dietary fluid or fiber
- Decreased physical activity
- Stress

Disease or condition related

- Pregnancy
- Hypothyroidism
- Diabetes
- Recent abdominal, peri-anal or pelvic surgery
- Pelvic floor dysfunction

Prevention and Self-Care

Dos: 4 Tips to Improve Your Bowel Function:

- 1) Eat MORE Fiber
 - Fiber is a carbohydrate which passes through your digestive tract undigested. It helps you feel fuller and promotes bowel regularity.
 - Recommended daily intake 20-35g
 - Be careful not to exceed daily requirements and to have soluble fibers (not insoluble) as otherwise it will increase your risk of constipation (<http://www.dietaryfiberdigest.com/can-too-much-fiber-cause-constipation/>)
- 2) Drinking MORE Fluids
 - 8-10 glasses of water per day. Fluids are necessary for fiber to pass through your digestive system smoothly.
 - The amount of fiber in juices is minimal. Do not use juices as a substitute for water.
- 3) Be MORE Active
 - Regular exercise at least 3 times per week can improve bowel function
- 4) Listen to your body and have a ROUTINE!
 - When you have to go. GO. Don't wait. Holding in stool can worsen bowel issues
 - Try to set a regular time every day that you go to the washroom. This will allow you to retrain your bowels.

Don'ts : What to Avoid if You are Prone to Constipation

- 1) Avoid Processed or Fast Foods
 - E.g. white breads, French fries, hamburgers, baked goods
- 2) Avoid Skipping Meals
 - Skipping meals disrupts the schedule of your bowels. It throws off the momentum of your bowels
- 3) Try to Avoid Straining
 - At times this may be difficult but straining can lead to tears and hemorrhoids
- 4) Avoid Overuse of Laxatives
 - Stimulant laxatives can decrease tone in the bowel over time which can affect bowel function. Speak to your health care provider or pharmacist regarding the appropriate use of these products

Medications

Below is a list of some medical treatment options available for constipation which your doctor or healthcare provider may suggest (Please note--- these options are not suitable for everyone. If you are considering using any of these products please speak with your healthcare provider or pharmacist prior to starting the medication). This list does not include ALL medications available.

Medication	Effect on Bowels	Examples
Bulking agents	Add bulk to your stool which stimulates natural bowel contractions	Methylcellulose (eg Citrucel), psyllium (eg Metamucil), wheat dextran (eg Benefiber)
Emollient laxatives	Aka Stool softeners Allows water and fats to mix with stool making the stool less dense	Docusate sodium (eg Colace), Docusate calcium
Osmotic laxatives	Makes stool soft by retaining water in stool. Safe for long-term use. Few side effects. Tolerated well.	Polyethylene glycol (eg Lax-a-Day, Restoralax), Lactulose, Glycerin, Sorbitol, Magnesium sulfate, Magnesium citrate
Stimulant laxatives	'Stimulates' bowel muscles to contract. Very effective but often has side effects. Should be used sparingly. Can cause diarrhea, bloating and cramping	Bisacodyl (eg Dolcolax), Senna (eg Senokot)

Note: Constipation medications are offered in different forms (oral pills and powders, suppositories or enemas). Speak to your healthcare provider about what options are appropriate for you.

Resources

Tricks to increase fiber in your diet:

<http://www.heartandstroke.com/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=iklQLcMWJtE&b=4016859&ct=5072985>

High Fiber Foods:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/25/high-fiber-foods_n_3983188.html

Additional Constipation Information:

http://www.cdhf.ca/bank/disorder_pdf_en/8constipation.pdf#zoom=100