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## Patient information

### Constipation

Gastroenterology and Surgical Departments at the  
Royal Liverpool Hospital and Broadgreen Hospital

## **What is constipation?**

### **Constipation causes one or more of the following:**

- Stools become hard, and difficult or painful to pass.
- The time between toilet trips increases compared to your usual. It is a change from your usual pattern that shows that you are constipated.
- Sometimes cramp type pains occur in your lower abdomen.

### **What are the causes of constipation?**

- Not eating enough fibre (roughage) is the common cause.
- Special 'slimming diets' are often low in fibre, and may cause constipation.
- Not drinking much may make constipation worse. Your stools will usually be soft and easily passed if you eat enough fibre, and drink enough fluid.
- Some medicines can cause constipation. Tell your doctor if you think a medicine is making you constipated.
- Various medical conditions can cause constipation. For example, an underactive thyroid, irritable bowel syndrome, and conditions that cause poor mobility, particularly in the elderly.
- Strong tea or coffee may make constipation worse.
- Unknown. Some people have a good diet, no apparent bowel disease, but become constipated. Their bowels are said to be 'under active'.

## **Do I need any tests?**

Not usually. However, tests may be advised if you have any of the following.

- If regular constipation is a new symptom, and there is no obvious cause such as a change in diet, lifestyle, or medication.
- If symptoms are severe and persistent.
- If other symptoms develop. For example, if you pass blood from your bowel, or have pain, weight loss, bouts of diarrhoea, or other unexplained symptoms in addition to constipation.

## **What can I do to ease constipation?**

- Eat more fibre by eating more fruit, vegetables, cereals, fruit juice, wholemeal bread, etc.
- Have lots to drink - at least two litres (about 8-10 cups) per day. Any sort of drink will do, but strong tea and coffee may not be so good as your main type of drink. You do not need to stop drinking tea and coffee, but cut down if you drink excessive amounts, and have other types of drink too, such as water or fruit juice.
- Exercise regularly if possible. Keeping your body active helps to keep your bowels active.
- Toileting. Do not ignore the feeling of needing the toilet. Some people suppress this feeling if they are busy. It may result in a backlog of stools forming that are difficult to pass later.

## What are the treatments for constipation?

Treatments are needed only if the self-help measures above do not work well.

- **Fibre supplements.** You can take bran, or 'bulking agents' such as Fybogel, to increase your fibre intake.
- **Laxatives.** You can buy some types at pharmacies, or get them on prescription. There are different types of laxatives that work in different ways.

You should only use laxatives as a temporary remedy if constipation becomes severe, unless advised otherwise by a doctor.

- **A change of medication** may be possible if a medicine is the cause of your constipation.
- **Do not stop a prescribed medicine without first consulting a doctor.**

Most people with constipation will be helped by the above treatments. Sometimes, an enema is needed for severe constipation. Rarely, a specialist may advise other treatments for severe constipation.

### **A note of caution about high fibre diets and fibre supplements**

Fibre works by giving extra bulk to the stools (faeces). It also absorbs water (a bit like blotting paper). The combination of fibre and fluid produces soft, bulky stools.

## **When you eat a high fibre diet, or take fibre supplements:**

- You should have plenty to drink. At least two litres per day (eight to ten cups) is advised. The fibre may become 'dry' and difficult to pass if you do not have enough to drink. Very rarely, lots of fibre and not enough fluid can cause an obstruction in the gut.
- You may notice an increase in wind (flatulence) and stomach bloating. This is normal and tends to settle down after a few months as your gut becomes used to the increase in fibre.

Occasionally, a lot of fibre can make symptoms worse if you have severe constipation. This is because the fibre may cause abdominal bloating and discomfort without doing much to clear a lot of faeces, which are further down the gut. See a doctor if you feel that a high fibre diet or fibre supplements are making symptoms worse.

## **Further information**

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