

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation is defined as having a bowel movement fewer than 3 times a week. The bowel movements are usually hard, dry, and small in size.

How does it occur?

You may have constipation because:

- You wait too long to have bowel movements.
- You do not drink enough fluids.
- You overuse some types of laxatives.
- You do not eat enough fiber.
- You don't have enough physical activity.
- You are taking iron pills or a medicine that has a side effect of constipation.

Other possible causes are:

- pregnancy
- depression or stress
- some medical conditions and diseases.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include having:

- small bowel movements
- hard, dry bowel movements
- uncomfortable or painful bowel movements that are hard to pass
- a longer time than usual between bowel movements
- bloating and the feeling of a full bowel.

Normal bowel movements vary from person to person. For some people, 3 times a day is normal. For others once every 3 days may be normal. What's important is whether there is a change in what has been normal for you.

How is it treated?

To ease your constipation:

- Drink more fluids.
- Add more fiber to your diet.
- Increase your physical activity.
- Do not delay bowel movements. Make sure that you go to the bathroom whenever you feel that you need to go.

Laxatives may be used for a short time, generally less than 1 week. Many people find fiber supplements, such as Metamucil, Citrucel, or other psyllium products, to be helpful, but in a few cases they make constipation worse.

Ask your healthcare provider if any medicines you are taking may be causing constipation.

Tell your healthcare provider if:

- You start having constipation after years of normal bowel movements.
- You have bouts of constipation alternating with bouts of diarrhea.
- You have pain during bowel movements or for some time afterward.
- Your bowel movements are dark or tar-colored or have blood in them.
- You are losing weight without trying.

How can I take care of myself?

To help take care of yourself:

- Eat fresh vegetables and fruit every day.
- Exercise regularly. For example, walk for at least 20 minutes every day.
- Drink prune juice or eat stewed fruits at breakfast.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Increase the whole-grain fiber in your diet by eating cereals with 5 or more grams of fiber per bowl (for example, shredded wheat or bran flakes).
- Take a fiber product like Metamucil or Citrucel once or twice a day for several days if you are constipated. If the problem continues, tell your healthcare provider.
- Avoid overusing other laxatives, such as cathartics, which are products that will cause a liquid bowel movement. Cathartics, including Milk of magnesia or Epsom salt, irritate the lining of the intestines.
- Ask your healthcare provider about taking fiber products or laxatives or giving yourself an enema.
- Contact your provider if constipation lasts longer than 1 week.

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Published by [RelayHealth](#).

Last modified: 2006-03-27

Last reviewed: 2006-12-02

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