

Constipation: Get Your Gut Moving!

Constipation is not uncommon. Constipation is defined as difficult and infrequent bowel movements. Find tips and ideas here to get things moving along!

How often should you “go” to the bathroom?

In healthy people, it is normal to have a bowel movement multiple times daily or as infrequent as once every few days. Constipation technically refers to painful bowel movements.

What causes constipation?

The most common causes of constipation are:

1. Not drinking enough water. Stool must absorb water to become softened and move easily through the digestive tract. When you are not properly hydrated, the stool becomes hard and difficult to move.
2. Eating lots of meat, cheese and butter, sugar and flour and not many vegetables, fruit, grains or beans. A diet like this is low in fiber.

However, in addition to **hydration and fiber** there are other possibilities that contribute to constipation, such as:

- **Inactivity.** When you don’t move, neither do your digestion muscles.
- **Celiac disease.** 1 in 18 people with constipation have undiagnosed celiac. For these people, the solution for constipation is a gluten free diet.
- **Irritable bowel syndrome.** This disorder is a major cause of constipation. Spasms of the colon slow down the movement of the intestines, thus allowing the stool to harden. Often people with IBS fluctuate between constipation and diarrhea.
- **Poor bowel habits.** Constipation may occur simply by ignoring the urge to go. If you don’t use your digestive muscles, they will eventually stop moving, which causes stool to sit in your colon, becoming hardened and painful to pass.
- **Chronic laxative abuse.** Laxatives reduce the body’s ability to conduct peristalsis (the contractions of your digestive muscles to move stool through your gut). Chronic use may also deplete your body of the fat-soluble vitamins A, E, D and K. Laxatives may be over-the-counter medications or herbal remedies, such as senna.
- **Hormonal imbalances.** Some hormonal disturbances, such as thyroid disease, can cause hardening of the stool.
- **Fissures and hemorrhoids.** Painful conditions such as fissures and hemorrhoids cause digestive muscle spasms, delaying a normal bowel movement.
- **Medications and supplements.** Pain medications (especially narcotics), antihistamines, diuretics, antispasmodic drugs, antidepressants, anticonvulsants, iron or calcium carbonate supplements, antacids containing aluminum or calcium, goldenseal, and St. John’s wort, are all potential culprits. Additionally, antibiotic therapy can destroy beneficial gut bacteria, leading to either constipation or diarrhea.
- **Stress.** Stress contributes to behaviors that are related to constipation, such as poor hydration, reliance on convenience foods that are low in fiber, and resisting the urge to go. It is also true that some people hold their emotions in their gut.



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How to do you deal with constipation?

Here is a step-by-step plan to help you accomplish alleviate constipation:

1. **Rule out medical problems.** Be sure that medical issues are not contributing to constipation, such as celiac disease, irritable bowel syndrome, or hypothyroid. Also be sure that your medications and supplements are not making constipation worse.

2. **Drink plenty of fluids.** Drink at least 64 ounces of non-caloric fluids daily to promote good digestion. Drinking a hot beverage 30 minutes before the time you usually have a bowel movement may also be helpful.



3. **Get moving!** Aim for at least 30 minutes of activity nearly every day.

4. **Increase fiber in your diet.** Fiber is a component of plant foods that is indigestible. Insoluble fiber increases stool bulk, absorbs water and increase s the growth of helpful intestinal bacteria. Increased stool bulk will stimulate your gut's propulsive motor! Good fiber sources are figs, dates, prunes, fruits in general, ground flaxseeds, whole grain cereals, beans, lentils and other vegetables.



5. **Eat less of constipating foods:**

- Animal fats (such as, untrimmed and higher fat cuts of red meat, poultry skin, cheese, whole milk and yogurt and ice cream).
- Refined sugars (there are many) in products such as sodas, desserts, and baked goods.
- Identify other foods that cause you to become constipated by using a food diary.

6. **Try a bulk laxative.** After 1 month, if your increased dietary fiber intake has not had the desired effect OR if you are unable to increase your dietary fiber intake sufficiently, try a bulk laxative. Triphala or psyllim seed husks are both bulk laxatives. Your Nutrition Counselor will be able to recommend brands that are right for you.

7. **Stimulate your healthy intestinal bacteria.** The healthy bacteria in your gut absorb water and increase the bulk and mobility of stool. Increase garlic, onion, asparagus, milk and yogurt (with live active cultures) in your diet. If needed, take a probiotic. Consult with your Nutrition Counselor to find out when a probiotic supplement is needed.

8. **Get adequate Magnesium and Vitamin C.**

- Magnesium stimulates peristalsis and is found in All bran cereal, spinach, millet, tofu, broccoli, sunflower seeds, almonds, wheat germ, blackstrap molasses, and lentils.
- Vitamin C softens stool and is found in papaya, broccoli, cantaloupe, green pepper, strawberries, oranges, kiwi, pink grapefruit, and tomato.

9. **Avoid continuous use of gut stimulants.** Caffeine and nicotine stimulate the gut to move. However, continued stimulation allows the gut to become lazy and lose its natural rhythm. It is for this same reason that stimulant laxatives (pills and teas) should be avoided.

10. **Manage stress appropriately.** Learn breathing techniques and other stress management modalities. Take pilates or yoga. Take 15 minutes daily just to reflect on the day. Seek support from CAPS to find more ways to combat stress.

