

What is constipation?

Constipation means having a hard, dry bowel motion (faeces) that is difficult to pass. It may cause straining, pain and discomfort. There may be slight bleeding from a small tear in 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. 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?

There are some common causes of 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.
- 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.
- Not feeling hungry/weight loss.
- 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*, and liquid paraffin help to soften the bowel motion. These are taken by mouth (*orally*).
- **Suppositories** – such as glycerine or *Durolax*. These are special 'tablets' which are inserted into rectum (the back passage).
- **Enemas** – such as *Microlax*, which is a special liquid which is inserted into the rectum.

Follow your doctor'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.

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 or a hernia. If the bowel becomes too full this may lead to a bowel obstruction that may need hospital treatment.

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.

Notes:

Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



See your local doctor or health care 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 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. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au



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