

# Constipation (Adult)

## What is constipation?

Constipation means the passage of a hard dry stool (bowel motion or faeces) which can be painful at times.

Constipation is common, affecting one in five people.

The frequency of passing stools is different for everybody and varies from 1 or 2 times a day to once every 3 days. As we get older, we go less frequently. Constipation is a change from your normal habit.

## The causes of constipation?

There are some common causes of constipation.

### Dietary

- Not drinking enough water
- A low fibre diet

### Lifestyle

- A lack of regular exercise
- Waiting too long to go to the toilet
- A change in routine e.g. travel or work hours

**Pregnancy** - due to the action of hormones, reduced activity and the pressure of the growing uterus against the intestines

**Older age** - due to reduced intestinal muscle contraction and reliance on regular medications

**Medication** - due to using strong painkillers but also after ceasing laxatives

**Chronic illness** - including certain bowel conditions and depression.

## What are the symptoms?

- Straining and pain on passing a hard bowel motion
- No bowel movement for several days
- Stomach cramps, although the pain is usually not severe
- Bloating stomach and flatulence
- Lack of appetite or weight loss
- Nausea
- General feeling of ill health
- Minor bleeding from a tear in the skin around the anus (outside of the back passage).

## In the Emergency Department

What happens in the Emergency Department depends a lot on what brought you into hospital.

If you came in with abdominal pain and the other serious causes of pain have been excluded, with your pain settling, then you will usually get treatment for your constipation.

Treatment (see overleaf) will be in the form of laxatives which aid the passage of stool through the bowel and also suppositories which help the passage of hard stool with less pain.

Enemas (see overleaf) may be required to help you get your bowels moving.

If your pain is severe and you feel very unwell then you may have something more serious than constipation and you must tell your doctor.

A change in bowel habit may represent underlying serious, but non acute, disease and you must follow this up with your local doctor.

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## Treatment Options

Treatment will depend on the cause of your constipation.

### Laxatives

These are taken orally to help soften the bowel motion and include prune juice, Metamucil, Lactulose, Coloxyl, and liquid paraffin. You should gradually cease these medications and substitute with a change in diet as suggested. Prunes and grapes, along with most fruits, are good laxatives.

### Suppositories

These are tablets which are inserted into the back passage e.g. glycerine.

### Enemas

This is where a special liquid, e.g. microlax, is inserted into the rectum and held for as long as possible to cause a bowel movement.

## Be aware

Altered bowel habit may be an early sign of bowel cancer and if a clear cause is not found then follow up with your GP or a gastroenterologist is indicated.

## Once you are home

### Diet:

- Drink plenty of fluids but not excessively and no more than 1 extra litre a day
- Slowly increase the amount of fibre you eat (such as cereals, wholegrain bread, vegetables and fruit). There is little fibre in most 'junk' foods.

### Lifestyle:

- Exercise more – regular walking or jogging is good
- Don't delay going to the toilet for other priorities. Be regular
- Check all your medications with your local doctor or pharmacist and change those that may be responsible.

## Instructions:

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## Seeking help:

- ✚ In a medical emergency go to your nearest emergency department or call 000.

