

Health Information Sheet

Constipation

BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Difficult, uncomfortable, or infrequent bowel movements that are hard and dry. In most people, constipation is harmless, but it can indicate an underlying disorder.

Frequent signs and symptoms

People vary widely in bowel activity. Any of the following may be a sign of constipation:

- Infrequent bowel movements, sometimes accompanied by abdominal swelling.
- Hard feces.
- Straining during bowel movements.
- Pain or bleeding with bowel movements.
- Sensation of continuing fullness after a bowel movement.

Causes

- Inadequate fluid intake.
- Insufficient fiber in the diet. Fiber adds bulk, holds water and creates easily passed, soft feces.
- Inactivity; depression.
- Hypothyroidism; hypercalcemia.
- Anal fissure.
- Chronic kidney failure.
- Back pain.
- Colon or rectal cancer.
- Irritable bowel syndrome.

Risk increase with

- Stress.
- Illness requiring complete bed rest.
- Use of certain drugs, including belladonna, calcium-channel blockers, beta-adrenergic blockers, tricyclic antidepressants, narcotics, atropine, iron, antacids.
- Sedentary life style.

Preventive measures

- Eat a well-balanced, high-fiber diet.
- Exercise regularly.
- Drink at least 8 glasses of water a day.

Expected outcomes

Usually curable with exercise, diet and adequate fluids.

Possible complications

- Hemorrhoids; laxative dependency.
- Hernia from excessive straining.
- Uterine or rectal prolapse.
- Spastic colitis; bowel obstruction.
- Chronic constipation.

TREATMENT

General measures

- Set aside a regular time each day for bowel movements. The best time is often within 1 hour after breakfast. Don't try to hurry. Sit at least 10 minutes, whether or not a bowel movement occurs.
- Drinking hot water, tea or coffee may help stimulate the bowel.
- If constipation persists for 3 or 4 days, use a non-prescription, disposable enema for temporary relief. If you prefer not to use a commercial enema preparation, you may give yourself an enema as follows:
 - Spread a bath mat on the bathroom floor or in the tub.
 - Fill an enema bag with lukewarm water.
 - Hang the enema bag no higher than 30 inches from the floor.
 - Lie on your left side on the mat.
 - Insert the nozzle gently inside the rectum.
 - Let the water flow in slowly, a little at a time. If it hurts, stop the water flow until the pain subsides. Then start the flow again.
 - Use the entire quart of water.
 - Hold the fluid inside until you are uncomfortable, then sit on the toilet for a bowel movement.

Medications

For occasional constipation, you may use stool softeners, mild non-prescription laxatives or enemas. Don't use laxatives or enemas regularly as this can cause dependency. Avoid harsh laxatives and cathartics, such as Epsom salts. The best laxatives are bulk-formers, such as bran, psyllium, polycarbophil and methylcellulose.

Activity

Regular exercise and good physical fitness help stimulate the bowel and maintain healthy bowel patterns.

Diet

Drink at least 8 glasses of water each day. Include bulk foods, such as bran and raw fruits and vegetables, in your diet. Avoid refined cereals and breads, pastries and sugar.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- Constipation persists despite self-care, especially if the constipation represents a change in your normal bowel patterns. (Changes in bowel patterns may be an early sign of cancer).
- Constipation is accompanied by fever or severe abdominal pain.