

Constipation in Adults

The most common cause of constipation is not eating enough fibre. Other causes are less common. The usual treatment is to eat more fibre, and have lots to drink. Laxatives are sometimes needed.

What is constipation?

Constipation causes one or more of the following.

- Stools (sometimes called faeces or motions) become hard, and difficult or painful to pass.
- The time between toilet trips increases compared to your usual. (There is a large range of normal 'bowel habit'. Some people normally go to the toilet to pass stools 2-3 times per day. For others, 2-3 times per week is normal. It is a **change** from your usual pattern that may indicate that you are constipated.)
- Sometimes crampy pains occur in the lower abdomen. You may also feel 'bloating' and feel sick if you have severe constipation.

What are the causes of constipation?

- **Not eating enough fibre (roughage)** is the common cause. The average person in the UK eats about 20 grams of fibre each day. But, 30 grams per day is recommended. Fibre is the part of plant food that is not digested. It remains in your gut. It adds bulk to the stools, and helps your bowels to work well. Foods high in fibre include: fruit, vegetables, cereals, etc.
- **Special 'slimming diets'** are often low in fibre, and may cause constipation.
- **Not drinking much** may make constipation worse. Your stools will usually be soft and easily passed if you eat enough fibre, and drink enough fluid.
- **Some medicines** can cause constipation. For example: painkillers (particularly those with codeine such as co-codamol), some antacids, some antidepressants, iron tablets, some diuretics ('water tablets'), some cough suppressants, and some medicines for Parkinson's disease. Tell a doctor if you suspect a medicine is making you constipated.
- **Various medical conditions** can cause constipation. For example, an underactive thyroid, irritable bowel syndrome, and conditions that cause poor mobility, particularly in the elderly.
- **Pregnancy.** About 1 in 5 pregnant women become constipated. It is due to the hormone changes of pregnancy that slow down the gut movements.
- **Strong tea or coffee** may make constipation worse. This is because they have a diuretic effect, which means they increase the amount of fluid in the urine, and leave less in the gut.
- **Unknown ('idiopathic').** Some people have a good diet, no apparent bowel disease, but become constipated. Their bowels are said to be 'underactive'. Another name for this is 'refractory idiopathic constipation'. This is quite common. Most cases occur in women. This condition tends to start in childhood or in early adulthood, and persist throughout life.

Do I need any tests?

Usually not. However, tests may be advised if you have any of the following.

- If regular constipation is a new symptom, and there is no apparent cause such as a change in diet, lifestyle, or medication.
- If symptoms are severe and persistent.
- If other symptoms develop. For example, if you pass blood from your bowel, or have pain, weight loss, bouts of diarrhoea, or other unexplained symptoms in addition to constipation.

What can I do to ease constipation?

- **Eat more fibre** by eating more fruit, vegetables, cereals, fruit juice, wholemeal bread, etc. Another leaflet in this series called 'Fibre in the Diet' gives more details.
- **Have lots to drink** - at least 2 litres (about 8-10 cups) per day. You will pass most of the fluid as urine, but some remains in the gut to soften the stools. Any sort of drink will do, but strong tea and coffee may not be so good as your main type of drink. You do not need to stop drinking tea and coffee, but cut down if you drink excessive amounts, and have other types of drink too, such as water or fruit juice.
- **Exercise regularly** if possible. Keeping your body active helps to keep your bowels active.
- **Toileting.** Do not ignore the feeling of needing the toilet. Some people suppress this feeling if they are busy. It may result in a backlog of stools forming that are difficult to pass later.

What are the treatments for constipation?

Treatments are needed only if the self-help measures above (fibre, fluid, etc) do not work well.

- **Fibre supplements.** You can take bran, or 'bulking agents' such as Fybogel, to increase your fibre intake. You can buy these from pharmacies and health food shops, or get them on prescription. You can take these long-term if necessary, but see the note of caution below.
- **Laxatives.** You can buy some types at pharmacies, or get them on prescription. There are different types of laxatives that work in different ways. You should only use laxatives as a temporary remedy if constipation becomes severe, unless advised otherwise by a doctor. (For example, some people with constipation caused by certain medical conditions are prescribed laxatives long-term. People with idiopathic refractory constipation may require long-term laxatives.)
- **A change of medication** may be possible if a medicine is the cause of your constipation. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without first consulting a doctor.

Most people with constipation will be helped by the above treatments. Sometimes, an enema is needed for severe constipation. Rarely, other treatments may be advised by a specialist for severe constipation.

A note of caution about high fibre diets and fibre supplements

Fibre works by giving extra bulk to the stools (faeces). It also absorbs water (a bit like blotting paper). The combination of fibre and fluid produces soft, bulky stools. When you eat a high fibre diet, or take fibre supplements:

- You should have plenty to drink. At least 2 litres per day (8-10 cups) is advised. The fibre may become 'dry' and difficult to pass if you do not have enough to drink. Very rarely, lots of fibre and not enough fluid can cause an obstruction in the gut.
- You may notice an increase in wind (flatulence) and stomach bloating. This is normal and tends to settle down after a few months as the gut becomes used to the increase in fibre.

Occasionally, a lot of fibre can make symptoms worse if you have severe constipation. This is because the fibre may cause abdominal bloating and discomfort without doing much to clear a lot of faeces which are further down the gut. See a doctor if you feel that a high fibre diet or fibre supplements are making symptoms worse.