

Happy Bowels and Constipation

Introduction

Constipation is a common problem that most people experience at some point. It can become a chronic condition and is often the source of significant discomfort and distress. It can affect other conditions, such as pelvic organ prolapse, which may be caused or worsened by the straining often associated with constipation.

Symptoms

- Straining to empty the bowels (25% of the time)
- Feeling the bowel is not fully empty after going to the toilet (25% of the time)
- Needing to assist the bowel opening process by inserting a finger
- Less than 2-3 bowel movements a week
- Hard, lumpy, small stools (25% of the time)
- Abdominal bloating, hardness, fullness and pain

Causes

There are a number of reasons why people suffer from constipation. Some of the common ones include:

- Ignoring the body's urge to empty the bowel
- Insufficient fluid intake
- Too little, or too much, fibre
- Side effects of some medications e.g. Metformin, iron tablets, painkillers containing codeine, Gabapentin, Tricyclic antidepressants
- Taking a combination of medication
- Pelvic organ prolapse
- Pregnancy, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, thyroid problems, chronic renal failure, hypercalcaemia
- Stress and depression
- Lifestyle and bowel habits
- Insufficient general exercise

Diet

- Aim for around 30g of fibre a day (an intake of 18 – 30g is ideal) – men need slightly more than women
- Drink 1.5 – 2 litres of fluid a day
- Eat regularly and avoid skipping breakfast
- Some people find that certain foods may help to keep their bowels moving regularly but there is no firm evidence. Try dried fruits, apples, apricots, blueberries, figs, peaches, asparagus, ripe bananas, berries, popcorn, cauliflower, parsnips, peppers, olives, cucumber, syrup of figs, prune juice, molasses, liquorice, chocolate, oats, coffee, spicy foods or golden linseeds (start with 1tsp and increase to 2tbsp as needed), for example
- Beans contain twice as much fibre as vegetable
- Prunes contain a natural laxative called Sorbitol
- Raw broccoli contains more fibre than cooked broccoli
- Nuts contain fibre – especially almonds, pecans and walnuts
- Also, some foods may lead towards constipation – try eliminating some of the following for 3-12 weeks and see if it makes any difference – dairy, gluten, corn, sugar, sweeteners, eggs, grains, unripe bananas, processed foods, alcohol, chocolate, red meat, Sharon fruit
- If you find that you have problems with excess wind try foods such as papaya, okra, dill, lemon balm, basil, fennel, live yoghurt and teas such as peppermint and chamomile. Eat slowly and regularly and chew well
- Cramps and IBS symptoms may be helped by fennel, okra, yams and barley
- Some nutritionists think that foods such as raw cabbage, carrots, apples, globe artichokes, kidney beans and live yoghurt can help with good gut health
- Diarrhoea may be helped by blackberries, dates and rice water
- Try taking a pre- or pro-biotic supplement, e.g. Yakult, for a month and continue if it helps – evidence on pro-biotics is inconclusive
- Fermented foods are reported by many as beneficial to good gut health – again evidence is limited
- A hot drink may help to stimulate a bowel movement – especially coffee!

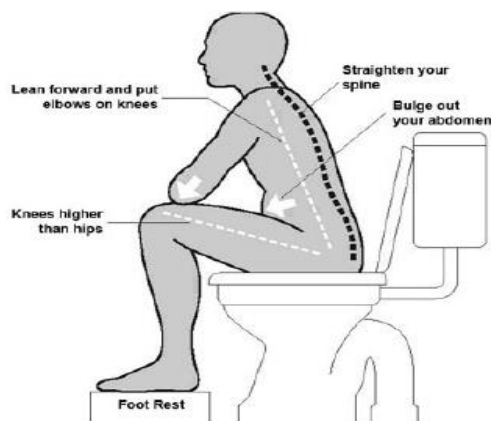
Bowel routine

- Aim for a regular time to open the bowels each day – try mornings or about 20-30 minutes after eating or having a hot drink. If nothing happens, try again at the same time the next day – not everyone needs to open their bowels daily
- Give yourself time – sometimes sitting on the toilet for ten minutes with a book will make a difference!
- Relax and breathe normally. Do not hold your breath as this will encourage you to strain

- Use your abdominal muscles effectively without straining. Place one hand on your lower abdomen and one on your waist. As your abdominal muscles tighten you should feel your hands being pushed out forwards and sideways. This is called 'brace' or 'brace and bulge'
- Alternatively, try making a strong "Shhhhhhh" sound to achieve a gentle bearing down without straining
- Concentrate on relaxing the anus to allow the stool to pass. Do not push from above without relaxing the anus below

Toilet position

- A good toilet position helps – try placing your feet on a small stool and lean forwards so that your elbows are on your knees. A small step on either side or a gadget such as a "Go Better" stool www.stressnomore.co.uk or "Squatty Potty" can be helpful www.squattypotty.co.uk



General tips

- Keep fit and active. Include sport and general exercise in your daily life
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- Try keeping a bowel diary to note any patterns related to diet or lifestyle
- Pelvic floor exercises, particularly relaxation, and a variety of physiotherapy techniques can help
- Try abdominal massage
- Avoid straining – sometimes changing position or rocking may help
- Different medications may help – speak to your GP