

# **PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF CONSTIPATION**

Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. Most constipation is temporary and not serious. Understanding it causes, prevention, and treatment will help most people find relief.

**Constipation is easier to prevent than to treat.** The main method of prevention is to increase the intake of fluids (preferably water) and dietary fiber. This may be achieved by consuming more vegetables and fruit and whole meal bread. The relief of constipation once it has occurred is by the use of laxatives.

## **What causes constipation?**

Constipation occurs when the colon absorbs too much water or if the colon's muscle contractions are slow or sluggish, causing the stool to move through the colon too slowly. As a result, stools can become hard and dry. Common causes of constipation are

- Not enough fiber in the diet
- Medications
- Milk
- Surgery
- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Dehydration
- Narcotic pain relievers

## **Not Enough Fiber in the Diet**

People who eat a high-fiber diet are less likely to become constipated. Fiber, both soluble and insoluble, is the part of fruits, vegetables, and grains that the body cannot digest. Soluble fiber dissolves easily in water and takes on a soft, gel-like texture in the intestines. Insoluble fiber passes through the intestines almost unchanged. The bulk and soft texture of fiber help prevent hard, dry stools that are difficult to pass. Americans eat an average of 5-14 grams of fiber daily, which is short of the 20-35 grams recommended by the American Dietetic Association.

## **Not Enough Liquids**

Many people report some relief from their constipation if they drink fluids such as water and juice to avoid dehydration. Liquids add fluid to the colon and bulk to the stools, making bowel movements softer and easier to pass.

People who have problems with constipation should try to drink liquids every day. However, liquids that contain caffeine, such as coffee and cola drinks will worsen one's symptoms by causing dehydration. Alcohol is another beverage that causes dehydration. It is important to drink fluids that hydrate the body, especially when consuming caffeine containing drinks or alcoholic beverages.

## **Medications**

Some medications can cause constipation, including

- Pain medications (especially narcotics)
- Iron supplements

## **Ignoring the Urge to Have a Bowel Movement**

People who ignore the urge to have a bowel movement may eventually stop feeling the need to have one, which can lead to constipation. Some people delay having a bowel movement because they do not want to use toilets outside the home. Others ignore the urge because they are too busy.

## **PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF CONSTIPATION**

- The most common cause of constipation is poor diet.
- Other causes of constipation include medications and surgery.
  - Eat a high-fiber diet that includes beans, bran, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables including asparagus and carrots. For people prone to constipation, limiting foods that have little or no fiber, such as ice cream, cheese, meat and processed foods, is also important.
  - Drink plenty of water and other liquids, such as fruit and vegetable juices and clear soups, so as not to become dehydrated
  - Do not ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.
  - Try to prevent constipation **BEFORE** surgery.

### **Prior to Surgery, Make Every Effort to Avoid Constipation**

Eat a high fiber diet or take a fiber supplement (Metamucil, Fiberall, Fibercon, Citrucel, or Konsyl)  
Take a stool softener if needed (Colace or Surfak).  
Drink plenty of hydrating liquids.

### **After Surgery, Make Every Effort to Avoid Constipation**

Eat a high fiber diet or take a fiber supplement (Metamucil, Fiberall, Fibercon, Citrucel, or Konsyl)  
Take a stool softener if needed (Colace or Surfak).  
Drink plenty of hydrating liquids.

## **IF YOU DO NOT HAVE A BOWEL MOVEMENT WITHIN 2 DAYS OF SURGERY**

### ***TAKE ACTION, TREAT THE CONSTIPATION***

You may take laxatives. Laxatives take by mouth are available in liquid, tablet, gum powder, and granule forms. They work in various ways:

- **Bulk-forming laxatives** generally are considered the safest. These laxatives, also known as fiber supplements, are taken with water. They absorb water in the intestine and make the stool softer. Brand names include Metamucil, Fiberall, Citrucel, Konsyl and Serutan. These agents must be taken with water or they can cause obstruction.
- **Stimulants** cause rhythmic muscle contractions in the intestines. Brand names include Correctol, Dulcolax, Purge and Senokot.
- **Osmotics** cause fluids to flow in a special way through the colon. Brand names include Cephalac, Sorbitol and Miralax.

- **Lubricants** grease the stool, enabling it to move through the intestine more easily. Mineral oil is the most common example. Brand names include Fleet and Zymenol. Lubricants typically stimulate a bowel movement within 8 hours.
- **Saline Laxatives** act like a sponge to draw water into the colon for easier passage of stool. Brand names include Milk of Magnesia and Haley's M-O. Saline laxatives are used to treat acute constipation if there is no indication of bowel obstruction.

You may also use enemas or suppositories.

- **Enemas:** Brand names include Fleet. Enemas typically stimulate a bowel movement within hours.
- **Suppositories** may also be used to stimulate a bowel movement