

Constipation

Constipation is when your stools become hard and you find it more difficult than usual, or even painful, to pass them when going to the toilet. You may also have a feeling of being unable to completely empty your bowels. Opening your bowels may be more difficult because your stools are hard, lumpy and dry, or because they are abnormally small or large.

Constipation is usually harmless being constipated once in a while is common and usually completely harmless and in most cases is usually short-lived and settles within a few days to 4 weeks at the most.

Managing your condition

It may be possible to ease constipation and its symptoms by making a few simple changes to your diet and lifestyle. We're all different when it comes to bowel habits; some of us pass stools only every three or four days, whereas others may go more than once a day. Try to maintain a healthy diet and keep hydrated.

How can I avoid triggers/ suggested lifestyle changes

It may be possible to ease constipation and its symptoms by making a few simple changes to your diet and lifestyle.

- **Healthy diet** - Increasing your daily fibre intake by eating a higher proportion of fruit, vegetables, seeds, pulses and cereals, or by taking soluble fibre in the form of oats, can help to alleviate symptoms and prevent symptoms from recurring. These food stuffs help to make your stools softer and bulkier, and therefore easier to pass
- **Hydration** - Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration
- **Exercise** - Try to exercise more, this helps your bowels digest food
- **Listen to your body** - Respond to your bowel's natural pattern and do not delay going to the toilet when you feel the urge to go
- **Medicine review** – Some medicines can cause constipation such as some pain killers. You can review the side effects on the information of medication you currently take. If you feel it may be the cause speak with your pharmacist, GP or nurse for advice before stopping your medication.

How do I treat?

If the suggestions above have not worked you may wish to try medication to treat your constipation. There are many preparations available over the counter at your pharmacy as well as local shops and supermarkets.

- **Bulk-forming preparations** - such as ispaghula husk and methylcellulose, which work in the same way as dietary fibre; they increase the bulk of your stools (faeces) by helping them retain fluid, encouraging your bowels to push the stools out. These start to work within 2-3 days.
- **Stool softeners** - such as arachis oil and docusate sodium, which increase the fluid content of hard, dry stools, making them easier to pass
- **Bowel stimulants** - such as bisacodyl or senna, which speed up the movement of your bowels by stimulating the nerves that control the muscles lining your digestive tract
- **Speak to your pharmacist** - for advice if you're not sure which type of medicine is best for you and your symptoms.

Ideally, laxatives should only be used occasionally and for short periods of time. It is important to stop taking a laxative as soon as your constipation improves.

To help stop constipation returning follow the suggested lifestyle changes; these types of changes are a much better way of preventing constipation rather than excessive use of laxatives.

When should I seek advice?

In rare cases, more serious underlying causes can make you constipated. See your GP if you notice any of the following:

- **Duration** - You've been constipated or have a persistent feeling of not being able to empty your bowel completely that doesn't go away within six weeks.
- **Other symptoms** - Your tummy becomes increasingly swollen, and/or you start vomiting, which could suggest that your bowels are blocked.
- **Age** - You're over 50 and have never suffered from constipation before.
- **Medication** - You think that a medication makes you constipated.
- **Blood in your stools** - You notice blood in your stools, particularly if you don't have any pain or discomfort around the opening of your back passage.
- **'General' symptoms** - You've been losing weight for no apparent reason; you also feel tired all the time, 'not quite right', sweaty or feverish; or you find that these symptoms don't go away within four to six weeks.

More information is available at the following website

- NHS website - www.nhs.uk
- Or visit your local pharmacy for advice

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