

Tips for Relieving Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation is when you have painful or difficult bowel movements. This can occur when your colon absorbs too much fluid as the stool is passing through or if the stool is passing through too slowly. You may feel bloated and it may hurt when passing the stool. The stool you are trying to pass may be small, hard and dry.

What causes constipation?

Below are common causes:

- Not drinking enough fluids
- A diet low in fiber
- Eating in a hurry or not on a regular basis
- Not being physically active
- Travel
- Pregnancy
- Pain pills or other medicines
- Not using the bathroom when you feel the urge
- Abuse of laxatives
- Disease or problems with the colon or rectum
- Stroke or paralysis

Do you drink plenty of fluids?

Drink 8 to 10 glasses of fluids a day (water, juice, tea, etc.). Warm liquids like coffee, tea, or hot water with lemon may help you have a bowel movement.

Do you eat foods high in fiber?

There are two main types of fiber, soluble and insoluble. Soluble fiber attracts water and turns into a gel during digestion. This slows digestion, but also creates a softer stool that may be easier to pass. Soluble fiber is found in oat bran, barley, nuts, seeds, beans, lentils, peas, apples, pears, and some other fruits and vegetables.

Insoluble fiber is found in foods like wheat bran, vegetables, and whole grains. It may help speed the passage of foods through the stomach and intestines and adds bulk to the stool. Both types of fiber along with enough fluids help prevent and relieve constipation. Foods often contain both types of fiber.

How much fiber do I need?

Women should aim for 21-25 grams of total fiber each day while men need 30-38 grams per day, though it depends on age.

Are you getting enough exercise?

Exercise each day or at least every other day to get the bowel moving. Check with your doctor or nurse about what exercise is best for you.

Guidelines for Increasing Fiber Intake

- Each day include at least five servings of fruits and vegetables and two servings of whole grain breads, cereals, dried beans, peas or lentils in your diet.
- Slowly increase the fiber in your diet to avoid bloating or gas.
- Make sure to also increase your fluid intake to 8-10 glasses daily as you increase your fiber intake.

How can high fiber foods be added to my diet?

Include fruits, vegetables, legumes, and high fiber grains, like brown or wild rice, quinoa, whole grain breads, cereals, popcorn, and bran. Cooking fruits, vegetables, grains or dry beans does not decrease fiber, but peeling or juicing fruits or vegetables does decrease the fiber.

Add a small amount of 100% bran cereal, ground flax seed or wheat germ (1 to 3 tablespoons a day) into cooked cereal, casseroles, cookie dough, pancake batter, and other baked goods.

Add raw vegetables or fruits into salads or eat as a snack.

Use wheat germ or bran as a topping on ice cream, yogurt, pudding or applesauce.

Add nuts and dried fruits to baked goods or cereals.

You may use prunes and prune juice for their laxative effect.

Read nutrition labels to find out how much fiber per serving is in the foods you eat. Choose cereal and bread products with at least 5 grams of fiber per serving or more, when you can.

Do you eat in a hurry and not at regular times?

If you do, don't! Space your meals throughout the day. Allow yourself enough time to eat. You'll be more likely to include the amount of fiber and liquids that you need.

Do you always allow enough time to have a bowel movement?

It is important to make sure you have enough time for a bowel movement. Your bowels will be more active after eating a meal. You may find that this is a time when you might feel the need to use the bathroom. This is very common after the first meal of the day. Don't ignore the urge to have a bowel movement. If you ignore the urge, it may not return for quite some time.

When should I call the doctor?

- If constipation does not go away
- If you have very thin, pencil-like stools
- If you have abdominal pain and swelling
- If you have weight loss; lack of energy or appetite
- If you have rectal bleeding
- Before using any laxative or enemas

Foods High in Fiber:

Breads

- Whole grain breads, buns, rolls or crackers (dark rye, pumpernickel, oatmeal, whole wheat)
- Nut breads
- Bran muffins
- Breads or cereals with seeds
- Whole wheat flour pancakes and cookies

Cereals

- Bran cereals (100% bran, 40% bran flakes)
- Oat bran (hot or cold)
- Granola
- Maltex[®]
- Oatmeal
- Shredded wheat
- Cereals with nuts, raisins, seeds
- Wheatena[®]
- Ralston[®]
- Ezekiel[®]

Whole Grains and Flours

- Wheat germ
- Buckwheat
- Cornmeal
- Wheat bran
- High fiber granola bars (Fiber One[®], Kashi[®])
- Popcorn
- Brown rice
- Millet
- Whole wheat
- Bulger
- Barley
- Quinoa
- Wild rice
- Farro

Fruits

- Fresh fruits, those with edible skins (apples, pears) or seeds (berries) are best
- Dried fruits

Vegetables

- Raw or cooked vegetables

Legumes

- Dried beans or peas in the form of bean soup, baked beans, pea soup, kidney beans, lentils, garbanzo beans, black beans
- Peanuts
- Peanut butter
- Pasta made from legumes such as edamame, garbanzo beans, or black beans
- Tempeh

Teach Back

What is the most important thing you learned from this handout?

What changes will you make in your diet/lifestyle, based on what you learned today?

If you are a UW Health patient and have more questions please contact UW Health at one of the phone numbers listed below. You can also visit our website at www.uwhealth.org/nutrition.

Nutrition clinics for UW Hospital and Clinics (UWHC) and American Family Children's Hospital (AFCH) can be reached at: **(608) 890-5500**.

Nutrition clinics for UW Medical Foundation (UWMF) can be reached at: **(608) 287-2770**.

If you are a patient receiving care at UnityPoint – Meriter, Swedish American or a health system outside of UW Health, please use the phone numbers provided in your discharge instructions for any questions or concerns.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 6/2019 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#242.