



Bladder and Bowel UK

formerly PromoCon

part of Disabled Living

Discussing constipation in adults



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Constipation

Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. Almost everyone experiences an episode of constipation at some point in their life but fortunately most episodes of constipation are temporary and not serious. However for some individuals the problem with constipation can become chronic resulting in a number of distressing problems. Understanding its causes, prevention, and treatment will help most people find relief.

This booklet is designed to answer some of your questions regarding constipation. However further medical advice should always be sought if you still have questions unanswered or the problems you are having do not improve.

Bladder and Bowel UK will be happy to answer any further queries you may have via our confidential helpline 0161 607 8219

Q. I am having problems opening my bowels, how do I know if I am constipated?

A. Constipation can present in different ways with both the frequency (how often you go) and the consistency (how hard/soft the stool is) being of equal importance. It is now generally accepted that a diagnosis of constipation is made if an individual reports at least 2 of the following symptoms:

- Having to strain more than a quarter of the time you have a bowel movement
- Passing hard stools more than 25% of the time
- A feeling of incomplete emptying more than 25% of time
- Having to use manual manoeuvres to complete evacuation (such as a finger in the rectum)
- Passing less than 3 stools per week

Q. What can cause constipation?

A. There are a number of factors that can contribute towards the development of constipation and they include:

- Lack of fibre (roughage from fruit, vegetables and whole grains) in the diet
- Drinking insufficient fluids
- Lack of privacy when going to the loo
- Sedentary lifestyle (not doing enough exercise)
- A change in routine (such as a new job or going on holiday) or eating patterns
- Side effects from medication
- Anxiety/stress/depression
- Ignoring the urge to go to the loo

Q. I eat a good diet and take lots of exercise but I still have problems with constipation

A. We know that a certain number of people will get constipation despite having a good diet and no other contributory factors. Constipation appears to be more common in women and we are more likely to develop constipation as we get older. In these cases the bowel tends to be underactive and it is sometimes called 'idiopathic' or 'slow transit' constipation. This particular type of constipation often responds well to the addition of laxatives.

Alternatively some people develop constipation and have difficulties emptying their bowel due to pelvic floor/mechanical difficulties. Your doctor will be able to advise on what specialist help may be available.

Q. What can I do then at home to help relieve the constipation?

A. Toilet routine

It is important not to ignore the feeling to open your bowels

- Position on the toilet – try and sit with knees higher than hips (use a small step if necessary), leaning forwards with elbows on knees, bulge out abdomen and straighten spine

Diet and fluid intake

- Aim to drink at least 2 litres per day (8-10 cups)
- Try and eat 5 portions of fruit or vegetables per day as well as other high fibre foods such as wholemeal bread

Exercise

- Keeping active helps to keep your bowel moving



The correct position on the toilet

Q. When should I go and see someone about it?

A. Most episodes of constipation are short lived and can be managed at home with either simple measure or over the counter laxatives. However you should always seek advice from your doctor if:

- the constipation is a new symptom and there is no apparent cause such as a change in diet
- you have had a sudden change in bowel habit
- the constipation lasts longer than 3 weeks
- it is associated with other factors such as passing blood or weight loss

Q. Will I need any special investigations or tests?

A. Tests are not usually needed to diagnose constipation because the symptoms you have will be typical of the problem. However the doctor may want to send you for tests if the constipation is a new symptom or you have any of the symptoms mentioned previously



Always seek medical advice if you have any concerns or worries

Q. What is the treatment for constipation?

A. Treatment with a laxative is only needed if the lifestyle measures mentioned previously do not work.

- Some people choose to treat simple (acute) constipation with laxatives bought from the local pharmacy
- However if your symptoms do not improve or have been present for a long time (chronic) then you should see your GP or nurse who can check that everything is ok and prescribe a whole range of different laxatives and also provide advice regarding treatment and management options

Q. What are the different types of laxatives?

A. There are four main groups of laxatives

- Bulk forming laxatives – these bulk up your stools very much like fibre does and you need to ensure you drink plenty
- Stimulant laxatives – these stimulate the bowel to empty by increasing peristalsis (making the bowel muscle push harder)
- Osmotic laxatives – these help by helping the stool retain water so they don't become hard
- Stool softener laxatives – these work by wetting and softening the stool

Your doctor will decide which the best laxative for you to take is.



Keeping active helps to keep your bowel moving

Q. Despite taking laxatives I am still having problems with constipation – what else can be done?

A. We know that for a small group of people, despite taking laxatives problems with constipation can still persist. If this is the case then we would suggest the following:

- If you have just been taking laxatives bought from your local pharmacy then do speak to your GP regarding perhaps taking a different type of laxative
- If oral medications have not helped then your GP may recommend the use of enemas or suppositories
- If you have been trying different laxatives for at least 6 months, at the highest dose with no improvement with symptoms, then there is a different type of medication that may be suitable so speak to your GP about this
- If all the above fail to result in your symptoms improving then your GP may consider referring you on to be seen by a doctor who specialises in the problems you are experiencing for further investigation and treatment

The important thing to remember is that constipation is a common problem and that seeking help early is the key to successful treatment outcomes. Do not be embarrassed to ask for advice as it a problem we all have from time to time.

Further information

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Bladder and Bowel UK, working as part of the charity Disabled Living, provides impartial advice and information regarding bladder & bowel problems, products and services.

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