



What You Need to Know Constipation



Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. It is defined as having fewer bowel movements than usual, with stools that are hard or difficult to pass. This may be accompanied by a bloated, uncomfortable feeling in the abdomen. There is no right number of bowel movements to have per week. "Regularity" is different for each person.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Practitioners do not always know what causes this problem. Eating a diet with insufficient fiber or too few fluids, as well as overuse of laxatives, can be causes. Eating meats high in fat, dairy products, eggs, rich desserts, and foods high in refined sugars can also be a cause of constipation. Some medications such as antidepressants, antacids containing aluminum or calcium, antihistamines, and diuretics may also contribute to constipation.

Lack of exercise and lengthy bed rest, such as after an accident or illness, may cause constipation. Ignoring the natural urge to have a bowel movement may also lead to constipation. Often people may feel uncomfortable having bowel movements anywhere other than at home, but holding off bowel movements can cause ill effects if the delay is too long.

WHAT ROLE DOES DIET PLAY?

People may become constipated if they eat too few vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, all of which are high in fiber. Diets high in fiber can help to prevent constipation. Many people also do not drink enough fluids. Water and other liquids add bulk to stools, making bowel movements easier.

WHAT ABOUT MISUSE OF LAXATIVES?

Laxatives are not a cure for constipation. Heavy use of laxatives is usually not necessary and often can be habit forming. The body begins to rely on the laxative to bring on bowel movements and, over time, "forgets" how to work on its own. Another side effect of laxative use is diarrhea.

WHAT TREATMENT SHOULD I FOLLOW?

If you become constipated, please see your practitioner to rule out a more serious problem. If a serious problem is ruled out, the following suggestions will be helpful:

- Eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grain breads and cereals. (See the reverse side of this sheet for high fiber suggestions.)
- Drink plenty of fluids (1-2 quarts daily), but be aware that some people become constipated from drinking large quantities of milk.
- Try adding unprocessed bran to baked goods, cereal, or fruit, or add a fiber additive such as Metamucil or Fibercon to your daily intake.
- Stay ACTIVE! Try to get some exercise every day.
- DO NOT expect to have a bowel movement every day. "Regularity" differs from person to person.

Contact Health Services if you have any additional questions or concerns.





Finding Fiber in Food



It's easy to remember where to find fiber in foods...think plants! All grain products, fruits, nuts, vegetables and dried beans contain fiber, some more than others. Check out the lists below for the highest fiber choices and remember to read food labels when available. (Hint: "Dietary Fiber" is listed in the "Total Carbohydrate" section of the Nutrition Facts panel on food packages.)

GREAT GRAINS

100% whole grain breads, cereals, crackers, and muffins are good fiber choices. High fiber cereals include Fiber One, All Bran, Bran Buds, Bran Flakes, Fruit and Fiber, Shredded Wheat (frosted or plain), Raisin Bran, Raisin Nut Bran, Grape-Nuts, and oatmeal. Look for cereals with 4 or more grams of fiber per serving. Triscuits are a great snack cracker choice. Look for breads with at least 2 grams of fiber per slice. Typically these will be 100% whole-wheat versions, but some multigrain breads with nuts and/or seeds meet the 2-gram mark too. Bran muffins are the best choice, but muffins containing vegetables, dried fruits, and/or nuts contribute fiber too.

BEANS, BEANS, BEANS...

Dried beans are jam-packed with fiber. Eat beans as a main-dish or on the side at least twice a week. Try vegetarian chili, baked beans, garbanzo beans (a.k.a. chick peas) as a salad topping, black beans in wraps or on nachos. The soup possibilities are endless... think split pea, lentil, minestrone, or navy bean. Get'em any way you can!

FIVE-A-DAY

You can't go wrong with fruits and vegetables...in general, more is better. Start by working toward at least a total of five a day. Eat the skins whenever possible and remember all forms of fruits and veggies count, whether fresh, frozen, dried, or canned...juice is about the only exception as most are missing the fiber. Best bets include peas, corn, carrots, broccoli, baked potatoes with skin, dried prunes and dates, apples with skin, bananas, and strawberries.

GO NUTS

Nuts and seeds provide fiber too. Try almonds, walnuts, pecans, soynuts, and sunflower, pumpkin, and sesame seeds. Eat them as-is or in a trail mix with cereal and dried fruit.

FIBER REMINDERS

Adding fiber to your diet is a good idea, but like anything else, moderation is key. A total of 20-35 grams a day is recommended. Too much fiber can actually be a bad thing; excessive fiber can interfere with nutrient absorption and may cause constipation or diarrhea. So...

Go Slow... gradually add fiber to your diet; don't make drastic changes.

Drink More... increase your intake of caffeine-free and non-alcoholic beverages.

Have Fun... enjoy trying new foods or new twist on "old" ones.

Want more information on fiber or any food issue? Call the Office of Health Education & Promotion at (603) 862-3823 to schedule an appointment with our Nutritionist Counselor.



HEALTH SERVICES

(603)862-2856 (during hours of operation)|(603) 862-1530 (after hours)

www.unh.edu/health-services

