Constipation

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Summary

Most cases of constipation are successfully treated by eating a diet high in fibre, drinking more fluids and exercising daily.

Complications of chronic constipation include haemorrhoids, faecal impaction and rectal prolapse.

Over-the-counter laxatives are fine in the short term, but seek advice if the problem persists.

Constipation is the passing of hard, dry bowel motions (stools) that may be infrequent or difficult to pass. The most common causes of constipation include a change in routine, not enough fibre in the daily diet, not enough fluids and lack of exercise.

See your doctor for diagnosis and treatment. It is important not to over-treat constipation with laxatives in place of seeking medical advice.

Stools explained

Food nutrients are absorbed in the small intestine. Waste is massaged down the length of the large intestine by waves of muscular contractions (peristalsis). Once the excess water is removed, the waste is temporarily stored in the rectum. The anus is a muscular ring (sphincter) that can be opened at will to allow the removal of faeces.

Water makes up about three quarters of faecal content, while the rest is composed of solids, including undigested fibre, intestinal bacteria and dietary fats.

Symptoms of constipation

The symptoms include:

- needing to open the bowels less often than usual
- hard, dry stools that may be painful to pass
- straining to pass the motion
- having to sit on the toilet for much longer than usual
- the sensation afterwards that the bowel hasn’t fully emptied
- bloated abdomen
- abdominal cramps.

In some cases, constipation is caused by more serious illnesses and events, including tumours and systemic diseases.

Lifestyle-related causes of constipation

Constipation can be caused by many different lifestyle factors that often work in combination, including:

- A change in routine – normal bowel motions depend on the regular and rhythmic contraction of the bowels. This is part of the body’s internal ‘clock’ and is often upset with changes in routine. This type of constipation is often seen in shift workers and travellers.
- Low-fibre diet – as fibre is indigestible, it adds bulk to the faeces, making it more easily pushed along the digestive tract. There are two broad types of fibre; soluble and insoluble. Soluble fibre helps to soften the faeces. Good sources of soluble fibre include legumes, fruits and vegetables. Insoluble fibre adds bulk to the faeces, helping it to move more quickly through the bowel. Good sources of insoluble fibre are in wheat bran, wholegrain breads and cereals.
- Insufficient water – the fibre in faeces will only plump up with water. Constipation can occur from a high-fibre diet if insufficient water is consumed.
- Lack of regular exercise – living a sedentary lifestyle or being restricted in movement due to a disability are common causes of constipation.
- A tendency to ‘put off’ going to the toilet – ignoring the urge to go means that more water will be extracted from the stools, making them difficult to pass. Regularly ignoring this urge may make the body less sensitive to normal signals to go to the toilet.
- Some medications – such as narcotics (particularly codeine), antidepressants, iron supplements, calcium-channel blockers (antihypertensives, particularly verapamil) and non-magnesium antacids are known to slow bowel movements.
- Pregnancy – the action of hormones, reduced activity and the pressure of the growing uterus against the intestines mean that constipation is common during pregnancy.
- Advancing age – constipation is more common in the elderly. This is due to a number of factors, including reduced intestinal muscle contractions and reliance on regular medications.
- Illness – a period of illness, particularly an illness resulting in hospitalisation and bed-rest, typically results in constipation. Factors include change in routine, shyness, reduced food intake, pain (especially after abdominal surgery), and pain-relief medication such as morphine. Short-term treatment with laxatives is often required, but may be overlooked.

Medical causes of constipation

Constipation is sometimes symptomatic of underlying medical problems, such as:

- ‘Slow transit’ – some people naturally pass motions less often than most people. It seems their bowel ‘pacemaker’ may be less active. These individuals are more likely to become constipated with minor changes in their routine.
- Anal fissure – a tear in the lining of the anus (anal mucosa). The person may resist going to the toilet for fear of pain.

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Treatment depends on the cause, but could include:

- *Removal of the impacted faeces* – which may involve enemas, stool softeners and a short-term course of laxatives.
- *Dietary changes* – such as increasing the amount of fibre in the daily diet. Dietitians generally recommend about 30g of fibre every day. Good sources of fibre include wholegrain cereals, fruits, vegetables and legumes. The intake of foods such as milk, cheese, white rice, white flour and red meat should be restricted, because they tend to contribute to constipation.
- *More fluids* – liquids help to plump out faeces. However, it is important to restrict the intake of diuretic drinks such as tea, coffee and alcohol.
- *Fibre supplements* – these may be helpful if the person is reluctant or unable to include more wholegrain foods, fresh fruits or vegetables in their daily diet. As fibre supplements can aggravate or cause constipation, always check with your doctor or dietitian when using them.
- *Exercise* – one of the many benefits of regular exercise is improved bowel motility. Ideally, exercise should be taken every day for about 30 minutes. People with a condition that affects mobility need to be as active as possible each day, as every little bit of regular exercise helps.
- *Treatment for underlying disorder* – such as surgery to repair an abdominal hernia, hormone replacement therapy for hypothyroidism, or anaesthetic cream and sitz (salt water) baths for an anal fissure.
- *Laxatives* – there are two main types: bowel stimulants and agents that increase the water content of the stool. Bowel stimulants increase bowel contractions, but may cause cramps. Agents that increase the water content may interfere with the absorption of water from the bowel, or swell or bulk up the stool with fluid. When used appropriately, laxatives can greatly relieve acute and chronic constipation. There is little evidence that chronic use of laxatives at appropriate doses will lead to a ‘lazy’ or ‘twisted’ bowel.

**Where to get help**

- *Your doctor*
- *Dietitians Association of Australia* Tel. 1800 812 942
- *Pharmacist*

**Things to remember**

- Most cases of constipation are successfully treated by eating a diet high in fibre, drinking more fluids and exercising daily.
- Complications of chronic constipation include haemorrhoids, faecal impaction and rectal prolapse.
- Over-the-counter laxatives are fine in the short term, but seek advice if the problem persists.

**References**

- Fibre, Dietitians Association of Australia. More information here.

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Digestive system

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- Digestive system explained
- Oesophagus
- Stomach
- Small intestine
- Large intestine
- Rectum
- Liver and gallbladder
- Pancreas

Digestive system explained

- Barium tests
  Barium tests are used to examine conditions of the digestive tract such as reflux, narrowing or ulceration.

- Digestive system explained
  The digestive tract can be thought of as a long muscular tube with digestive organs attached along the way.

- Fibre in food
  A diet high in fibre keeps the digestive system healthy.

Oesophagus

- Barrett's oesophagus
  Symptoms of Barrett's oesophagus are similar to regular heartburn, which means many people don't seek treatment until their condition is quite advanced.

- Digestive tract birth defects
  Too much amniotic fluid surrounding the baby during pregnancy (polyhydramnios) may indicate the presence of defects of the digestive tract.

- Hiccups
  Hiccups that last for days, weeks or even years may be symptomatic of underlying disease.

- Indigestion
  Food inside the stomach is only kept there by the force of gravity so to avoid heartburn, don't lie down after a big meal.

- Throat cancer
  Risk factors for throat cancer include smoking and heavy alcohol consumption.

Stomach

- Abdominal pain in children
  Children may feel stomach pain for a range of reasons and may need treatment.

- Gastritis
  Gastritis may be caused by many factors including infection, alcohol, particular medications and some allergic and immune conditions.

- Hernias
  Both reducible and non-reducible hernias need to be surgically repaired - this is a common operation.

- Peritonitis
  Peritonitis is a life-threatening emergency that needs prompt medical treatment.

- Stomach cancer
  The symptoms of stomach cancer are usually vague and can be common to other medical conditions.

- Stomach ulcer
  Most stomach ulcers are caused by infection or medication, not stress or poor diet.

Small intestine
- Coeliac disease and gluten sensitivity
  Coeliac disease is an immune disease caused by gluten...

- Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis
  When people with inflammatory bowel disease are not experiencing a flare-up of their illness, they feel quite well and are often free of symptoms...

- Gastroenteritis
  It is important to establish the cause of gastro, as different types of gastroenteritis respond to different treatments...

- Gastroenteritis - amoebiasis
  Amoebiasis can cause diarrhoea among travellers to developing countries...

- Gastroenteritis - campylobacteriosis
  Campylobacteriosis is a type of gastroenteritis and is more common in children under five years of age and young adults...

- Gastroenteritis - cryptosporidiosis
  Outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis have been associated with child care centres, public swimming pools and contaminated water supplies...

- Gastroenteritis - giardiasis
  Most people infected with Giardia parasites do not develop symptoms but can still spread the infection to others...

- Gastroenteritis in children
  Gastroenteritis or Gastro can be dangerous for very young babies. Gastro is common in young children and spreads easily. Gastro is a bowel infection which causes diarrhoea (runny or watery poo) and...

- Gastroenteritis - salmonellosis
  You may be more prone to salmonellosis if you are elderly, have another medical condition (such as a weakened immune system) or are malnourished...

- Gastroenteritis - shigellosis
  Outbreaks of shigellosis gastroenteritis can occur in institutional settings, particularly where children are still in nappies or adults are incontinent...

- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
  Irritable bowel syndrome can't be cured with medications or special diets but avoiding individual triggers can help prevent it...

- Pets - safe handling of reptiles and tropical fish
  People in contact with tropical fish and reptiles such as turtles, lizards and snakes may be at risk of infections and illness due to germs (such as bacteria, viruses and parasites) carried on the...

- Rotavirus
  Rotavirus is a common cause of viral gastroenteritis for Australian babies and preschool children...

- Traveller's diarrhoea
  The risk of traveller's diarrhoea is higher where sanitation and hygiene standards are poor...

Large intestine

- Appendicitis
  Anyone of any age can be struck by appendicitis, but it seems to be more common during childhood and adolescence...

- Botulism
  Botulism is considered a medical emergency. If untreated, it may cause death...

- Bowel cancer
  Bowel cancer is highly curable if found at an early stage...

- Bowel motions
  Many illnesses and events can affect the colour and texture of faeces...

- Collagenous colitis and lymphocytic colitis
  Collagenous colitis and lymphocytic colitis are types of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)...

- Constipation
Most cases of constipation are treated by eating a diet high in fibre, drinking more fluids, and exercising daily...

- **Constipation and children**
  A healthy diet, plenty of fluids, exercise and regular toilet habits can help relieve constipation in children.

- **Diarrhoea**
  Acute diarrhoea in babies and young children can be life threatening.

- **Diverticulosis and diverticulitis**
  Diverticulosis and diverticulitis relate to the formation or infection of abnormal pouches in the bowel wall.

- **Flatulence**
  Foods that tend to trigger flatulence also contain essential nutrients and shouldn't be eliminated.

- **Incontinence and continence problems**
  Many things can be done to manage, treat and sometimes cure incontinence and continence problems.

- **Incontinence - prevention tips**
  Incontinence can be prevented in most cases.

- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)**
  Irritable bowel syndrome can't be cured with medications or special diets but avoiding individual triggers can help prevent it.

- **Pinworms**
  Despite the unsavoury reputation, a pinworm infection (worms) is relatively harmless and easily treated.

- **Polyps**
  Nasal polyps can sometimes interfere with breathing.

- **Short bowel syndrome**
  A person with short bowel syndrome is likely to be deficient in a range of important nutrients.

- **Slow transit constipation**
  A newborn with slow transit constipation may not pass meconium until 24 hours or more after being born.

- **Stoma after ileostomy or colostomy**
  A stoma is an artificially created hole (stoma) in the abdomen so that faeces can still leave the body.

- **Tapeworms and hydatid disease**
  It's important for your own health to control tapeworm infection in your dog.

**Rectum**

- **Anal fissure**
  Around half of cases of anal fissures heal by themselves with proper self-care and avoidance of constipation.

- **Haemorrhoids**
  A diet high in fibre can both treat and prevent haemorrhoids.

- **Rectal cancer**
  If treated in its earliest stages, rectal cancer is highly curable.

- **Rectal prolapse**
  Rectal prolapse occurs when the rectum turns itself inside out and comes out through the anus.

- **Rectocele**
  A rectocele is when the rectum protrudes into the vagina.

**Liver and gallbladder**

- **Cirrhosis of the liver**
  Cirrhosis is a type of liver damage where healthy cells are replaced by scar tissue.
• Gallbladder - gallstones and surgery
  Medical treatment for gallstones may not be necessary unless the gallstones cause symptoms...

• Gilbert's syndrome
  Gilbert's syndrome and hepatitis both cause jaundice but are not related...

• Hepatitis
  Hepatitis is an umbrella term for several diseases that affect the liver...

• Hepatitis A
  Immunisation is the best protection against hepatitis A infection and it is recommended for people in high-risk groups...

• Hepatitis B
  Hepatitis B is a viral infection that affects the liver and can lead to serious illness or death...

• Hepatitis B – immunisation
  Immunisation against hepatitis B reduces the risk of infection in babies...

• Hepatitis C
  In Australia, hepatitis C is most often spread through the sharing of unsterile drug injecting equipment. New all oral combination treatment has greatly improved health outcomes for people with...

• Hepatitis C Cure - what it means for Victorians (video)

• Jaundice in babies
  If your baby is full-term and healthy, mild jaundice is nothing to worry about and will resolve by itself within a week or so...

• Liver
  Some forms of liver disease are inherited, while others are caused by lifestyle factors...

• Liver cancer
  Liver cancer can be a primary cancer that starts in the liver, or a secondary cancer that starts in another part of the body and spreads to the liver...

• New drugs for the treatment of hepatitis C – Frequently Asked Questions for patients

• Primary biliary cirrhosis
  Primary biliary cirrhosis is an autoimmune condition characterised by inflammation and scarring of the bile ducts within the liver...

Pancreas

• Diabetes
  Diabetes and the build-up of glucose (sugar) in the blood can cause serious complications if left untreated...

• Diabetes type 1
  Type 1 diabetes can affect anyone of any age, but is more common in people under 30 years...

• Diabetes type 2
  Type 2 diabetes may be prevented, but it cannot be cured...

• Pancreas
  The pancreas helps to digest food, particularly protein...

• Pancreatic cancer
  The causes of pancreatic cancer are unknown, but smokers are at greater risk...

• Pancreatitis
  Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas, which can be either acute or chronic...

Related Information
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- Child and Youth Health SA.
- Dietitians Association of Australia.
- eMedicine.

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