

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CONSTIPATION

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What Is Constipation?

Constipation is a problem where people usually have fewer than 3 bowel movements per week. People with constipation also have bowel movements that are hard to pass. Constipation is common. Most people will have constipation at one time in their life; however, some people have chronic constipation, meaning that it lasts for several weeks. Factors that may increase your risk for constipation include:

- Older age
- Certain health problems, like diabetes or thyroid problems
- Some medicines, like opiates for pain
- Decreased physical activity
- A diet low in fiber
- Not drinking enough water

What Are the Warning Signs?

Symptoms of constipation can include:

- Infrequent bowel movements (fewer than 3/wk)
- Straining during a bowel movement
- Feeling bloated or having pain in the stomach
- Hard or tough stools
- A feeling of a blockage or an incomplete bowel movement

How Is It Diagnosed?

Your doctor will talk with you about your medical history and any symptoms you may have. A physical examination will be performed. Your doctor will examine and feel your stomach. Some people may also need a rectal examination. During the rectal examination, the doctor inspects the anus and inserts his/her finger into the rectum to feel for masses. Your doctor may ask you to keep a record of your bowel movements and what you eat and drink. Your doctor may also ask you about:

- How long you have had these symptoms
- Anything that make your constipation worse or better
- Foods and drinks you eat
- Any medicines you take or have taken

How Is It Treated?

There are different ways to treat constipation.

- Many people can manage their constipation with lifestyle changes. Some people may need to take medicines. Treatments for constipation include:
- Changes to diet



- Over-the-counter laxatives or fiber supplements
- Drinking more water
- Stopping any medicines that may be causing or making constipation worse
- Over-the-counter enema kits
- Act on the urge to have a bowel movement. This urge may be greatest right after eating.
- Some people may need prescription medicines if lifestyle changes and over-the-counter medicines do not work

Questions for My Doctor

- What changes can I make to my diet?
- How much water should I drink each day?
- Are over-the-counter medicines safe?
- How can exercise help?
- What types of foods are high in fiber?

Bottom Line

- Constipation is a problem where people usually have fewer than 3 bowel movements per week and have bowel movements that are hard to pass.
- Symptoms of constipation can also include a feeling of bloating or pain in the stomach, and hard or tough stools.
- Your doctor will talk with you about your symptoms and perform an examination to diagnose constipation. You may be asked to keep track of your bowel movements and what you eat or drink to help understand your constipation.
- Treatment options include diet changes, laxatives and fiber supplements, and changes to your bathroom schedule. Some people may need to take prescription medicines.

For More Information



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Medline Plus:

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/constipation.html

American Gastroenterological Association:

www.gastro.org/patient-center/digestive-conditions/constipation

American College of Physicians:

www.acponline.org/patients_families/products/health_tips/oic_en.pdf