

What You Need to Know About Constipation

What Is Constipation?

Constipation is a very common condition of the digestive system. With constipation, you can have infrequent stools that are hard, lumpy, difficult to pass, and uncomfortable. Other symptoms can include stomach pain or cramps, feeling bloated or swollen in your belly area, straining when going to the bathroom, or feeling like you haven't fully emptied your bowels. There is no typical number of bowel movements you're supposed to have weekly, but people who are constipated often have fewer than 3.

While almost everyone experiences occasional constipation, sometimes you may have constipation for a longer period of time (chronic constipation), and you may need treatment to help resolve it. Chronic constipation is when you have symptoms that last longer than a few weeks. If that happens, you should talk to your doctor or a healthcare provider. With proper care, constipation can be managed.

Causes of constipation can include:

- Not getting enough fiber from your diet or drinking enough water
- Not getting enough exercise
- Changes in your daily routine, such as traveling
- Stress
- Older age
- Certain medicines or supplements (such as iron or calcium)
- Pregnancy and certain other health conditions

For most people who have chronic constipation, a cause cannot be identified.

Ways to Help Prevent Constipation

Eating a well-balanced diet that includes foods rich in fiber -- such as vegetables, legumes, fruits, whole grains, and beans -- can help prevent constipation. Staying hydrated by drinking water every day can also help. Talk to your doctor or healthcare provider about how much water you should be drinking daily. In addition, getting regular physical activity or exercise and not holding back bowel movements can be important. You should try to go to the bathroom as soon as you are able to.



Talking to Your Doctor or Healthcare Provider About Constipation

Bringing up your bathroom habits with your doctor or healthcare provider may seem uncomfortable, but it can be just as important as discussing any other health condition. If you're having constipation, your doctor may be able to recommend treatment to help manage it and relieve your symptoms.

When you talk to your doctor or healthcare provider, be sure to tell them about your symptoms and how long you've been having them. You should also tell them about:

- All medicines you take -- including those you can get without a prescription -- and herbals and supplements
- How often you have bowel movements
- What symptoms are bothersome to you
- If you've taken anything to treat your constipation

Be sure to contact your doctor or healthcare provider right away if you are losing weight unintentionally; if you have blood in your stool, painful bowel movements, or a fever; or if your symptoms wake you up in the middle of the night.

Questions you can ask your doctor or healthcare provider about constipation can include:

How will I know if I'm constipated, or what symptoms should I look for?

What could be causing my constipation?

How can I improve my bowel habits?

Are there any lifestyle changes I should make?

What treatments are available, and what are their side effects?