

CONSTIPATION

WHAT IS IT?

- Constipation refers to a reduction in the frequency of bowel motions or increased difficulty in passing stools.
- It is a symptom, not a disease. Most people have experienced constipation that corrects itself with time, changes in diet or increased physical activity.
- Constipation may be caused by a number of different medical conditions, lifestyle choices or certain medicines.
- In adults constipation is usually diagnosed depending on how often the person has passed a stool.
- In infants constipation refers to the hardness or compactness of the stools and the difficulty passing them, and not to the frequency of the bowel movements.
- Although constipation may occur at all stages of life, from babies to adulthood to old age, it tends to occur more commonly in women and in the elderly.
- Almost everyone will get constipated at some point in their lives. It is estimated that at any given time approximately 2% to 30% of the population suffers from some of the symptoms.
- Fortunately, constipation is usually not serious, however it can be painful and frustrating and it should always be seen to in case it is a symptom of a more serious disease.

WHEN DO YOU HAVE CONSTIPATION?

- Constipation is defined as having a bowel movement fewer than three times per week.
- Depending on the person, normal stool passing may be three times a day or three times a week. Some people might believe they are constipated just because they have not been to the toilet for only one day.
- The diagnosis of constipation also takes into account the compactness of the stool. Stools are usually hard, dry, small in size and difficult to pass.
- Some people who are constipated find it painful to have a bowel movement and complain about straining, bloating and the sensation of a full bowel.



CAUSES

- Poor general health
- Immobility or an inactive lifestyle
- Insufficient fluid intake
- A diet low in fibre. Fibre retains fluid and makes the stools light and soft.
- Disruption of regular routine i.e. travelling
- Stress or depression
- Overuse of laxatives (medication used to treat constipation)
- Ignoring the urge to go to the toilet
- Inadequate toilet facilities; people avoid using the facilities
- Hormonal changes i.e. pregnancy

PREVENTION

- A well-balanced diet high in fibre, including bran, fruits and vegetables, is often helpful.
- Limiting foods that have little or no fibre, such as ice cream, cheese, meat and processed foods, white bread, cakes and sugar.
- Drinking at least 8 to 10 glasses of water a day. Hot beverages, such as coffee, tea or hot water may stimulate bowel movements.
- Prunes and plum juice can be beneficial.
- Regular exercise improves digestion and reduces stress.
- Developing a regular bowel habit. The best time is usually the first hour after breakfast.
- Laxatives used to treat constipation should be used for a short period of time and where necessary, in consultation with your doctor.

TREATMENT

- Water and fibre
The main treatment of constipation involves the increased intake of water and fibre (either dietary fibre or as supplements).
- Laxatives
Most people who are mildly constipated do not need laxatives. However, for those who have made diet and lifestyle changes and are still constipated, laxatives or enemas can be recommended for a limited time. Ask your pharmacist to recommend one that will be the best for you.

CONCLUSION

Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. Almost everyone experiences constipation at some point in their lives, and a poor diet typically is the cause. Persistent constipation or any change in bowel habit, whether towards constipation or looseness, should be investigated, especially in adults older than 40 years.

BRISTOL STOOL CHART

	Type 1 Separate hard lumps	SEVERE CONSTIPATION
	Type 2 Lumpy and sausage like	MILD CONSTIPATION
	Type 3 A sausage shape with cracks in the surface	NORMAL
	Type 4 Like a smooth, soft sausage or snake	NORMAL
	Type 5 Soft blobs with clear-cut edges	LACKING FIBRE
	Type 6 Mushy consistency with ragged edges	MILD DIARRHEA
	Type 7 Liquid consistency with no solid pieces	SEVERE DIARRHEA

DISCLAIMER

TAKE NOTE

The information provided in this article is for education purposes only and does not serve as a medical diagnosis. Members should always consult their healthcare provider with serious symptoms.

Please note that Heritage Health plans do not necessarily cover the costs of the condition/s described.

