

# Constipation

## What is constipation?

Constipation is:

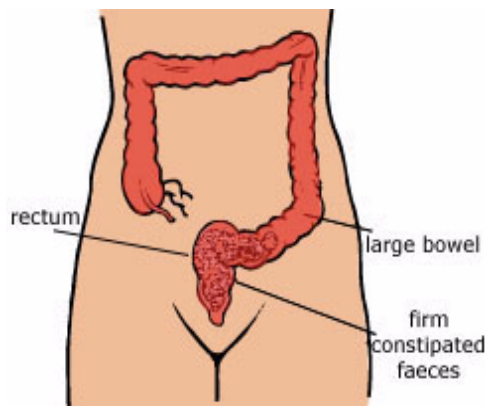
- hard, often very small stools
- infrequent bowel movements or
- a feeling of unsatisfied emptying of the bowel

## What are the causes?

It is mainly caused by simple things such as:

- neglecting the habit of attending the toilet
- not responding to 'nature's call'
- overuse of laxatives
- overuse of pain-killers
- a poor diet with a lack of fibre
- lack of exercise
- insufficient fluid intake

Apart from slack habits, there are other important causes such as bowel cancer, drugs, thyroid disease, depression, anorexia nervosa and lead poisoning. Any medicine that you are taking should be suspected of causing constipation.



## What are the risks?

Constipation can cause a lot of discomfort in the stomach and rectum and may cause blockage of the bowel. It can lead

to problems of the anus such as piles and itchiness, and to hernias.

## Very important points

- If an obvious change occurs in your bowel habit, consult your doctor for advice.
- Bowel regularity can vary from person to person. Some people believe that just as the earth rotates on its axis once a day, so too should their bowels open daily to ensure good health. This may be ideal, but it can be normal to 'go' every second day or even twice a week.

## Useful hints to avoid constipation

### Activity

Adequate exercise, especially walking, is important.

### Diet

Take plenty of fluids, especially water and fruit juices. Eat foods that provide bulk and roughage, for example vegetables and salads, cereals (especially bran), fresh and dried fruits, and wholemeal bread. Some examples of food with good bulk (from least to most) are potatoes, bananas, cauliflower, peas, cabbage, lettuce, apples, carrots and bran. Fruit has good fibre, especially in the skin, and some have natural laxatives (e.g. prunes, figs, rhubarb, apricots).

### Habit

Answer nature's call to empty your bowels as soon as possible. Develop the after-breakfast habit. Allow time for a good relaxed breakfast and then sit on the toilet (up to 10 minutes if necessary) while reading! Eat meals slowly in a relaxed manner at regular times.

### Laxatives

Avoid laxatives, codeine compounds (tablets or mixture) and neglecting the call of nature.

Many laxatives can actually aggravate the problem in the long run and should be avoided. If absolutely necessary, your doctor may recommend one of the hydrophilic bulk-forming agents such as isphagula and psyllium.