



Constipation

Constipation is having trouble passing stool or having hard stools. “Regularity” does not mean that you have a bowel movement every day. Normal bowel habits range from 3 movements a day to 3 each week. What is more important is what is normal for you.

Signs & Symptoms

- A hard time passing stool. Not being able to pass stool. Having very hard stool.
- Straining to have a bowel movement.
- Abdominal swelling. The feeling of continued fullness after passing stool.

Causes

- Drinking too few fluids. Not eating enough dietary fiber.
- Not being active enough.
- Not going to the bathroom when you have the urge to pass stool.
- Misuse of laxatives.
- A side effect of some heart, pain, and antidepressant medicines, as well as, antacids, antihistamines, and water pills.
- Chronic illnesses that slow the digestive tract. Examples are diabetes and an underactive thyroid.
- Cancer or other diseases of the bowel.

Treatment

Self-care usually treats constipation. You may also need to talk to your doctor about health problems and medicines that could cause the problem.

Questions to Ask

With constipation, do you have any of these problems?

- Abdominal pain, especially on the lower left side, that occurs often.
- Very narrow stools.
- Recent change in bowel movement pattern.
- Nausea or vomiting.

YES



NO

Did constipation occur after taking prescribed or over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, herbal products, etc.? Or, does it worsen or not improve after 1 week of self-care?

YES



NO



Self-Care / Prevention

- Eat foods high in dietary fiber. Examples are bran, whole-grain breads and cereals, and fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Drink at least 1½ to 2 quarts fluids every day. Have hot water, tea, etc. to stimulate the bowel.
- Get enough exercise.
- Don't resist the urge to pass stool.
- If you take antacids or iron supplements and get constipated easily, discuss the use of these with your doctor.
- Take stool softeners (e.g., Colace), fiber supplements (e.g., Metamucil), “stimulant” laxatives (e.g., Ex-Lax), or enemas, as directed on the label and by your doctor.