

## Preventing Constipation

Constipation is when you have bowel movements that are difficult, painful or less often than is normal for you.

Constipation may be due to:

- Not drinking enough fluids
- Emotional stress
- Certain illnesses
- A low fiber diet
- Lack of exercise
- Waiting too long after feeling the urge
- Medications, especially those used for pain control or depression
- Chemotherapy treatments

*Often, constipation is relieved by choosing highfiber foods, increasing fluids, and exercising.*

### General Guidelines

The following guidelines will help prevent constipation.

#### **Time**

If you can, try to have a bowel movement at the same time each day. For many, after breakfast is a good time. Respond to the urge right away. Putting it off may cause you to strain when you do go. That is something to avoid if you have certain heart or medical conditions.

#### **Exercise**

Exercise each day with your doctor's approval. Walking is a great way to prevent or improve constipation. If you are on bed rest, ask if you may do some light exercises in bed.

#### **Fiber**

Foods containing fiber help prevent or treat constipation. Common sources of fiber include:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Whole grain or whole wheat cereals and breads such as wheat bran, shredded wheat, corn bread, and oatmeal

Unless your doctor tells you otherwise, try to include 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Raw fruits and vegetables with skins that can be eaten are best. Prune juice acts as a natural bowel stimulant. With chronic constipation, a ½ to 1 cup of prune juice each day may help.

Drink more fluids as you gradually add more fiber to your diet. Adding too much fiber too quickly can cause gas and bloating. Allow a few weeks for mild gas to subside.

Eat fiber-rich foods every day to stay regular. See page 4 for a list of fiber-rich foods. Unless told otherwise, try to take 25 to 38 grams of fiber every day.

### **Fluids**

Drink at least 8 to 10 glasses a day. You may not feel like drinking so you may need to remind yourself to drink. This is especially important if you increase the fiber in your diet. You should be well-hydrated for the fiber to work. If you drink only when you are thirsty, it may not be enough for the fiber work. Also, a warm beverage after a meal may naturally stimulate the urge to have a bowel movement.

## **Medications and Treatments**

Often, constipation is relieved by eating high fiber foods, increasing fluids and by exercising.

However, if constipation persists, medications may be needed. Below is a partial list of medicines used to treat constipation; the actions and cautions for each type of medicine are briefly explained. If you have any questions about these or any other medications, please ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Take all medications as directed. Some types of laxatives may be habit forming and all can affect the way other medications work. Be sure to talk with your doctor or pharmacist before taking laxatives with any other medicines.

**WARNING: Do NOT take ANY laxative product if you have cramps, nausea, vomiting, or abdominal pain.**

### ***Bulk-Forming Laxatives***

These products often are the most helpful of all the laxatives in combination with diet, fluids and exercise.

**Examples:** Metamucil®, Fibercon®, Citrucel®

**Action:** Adds bulk to the stool and absorbs water, which helps the body push the stool forward.

**Caution:** These agents usually have few side effects, but may cause stomach cramping, gas or nausea. These laxatives should be taken 2 to 3 hours before or after other medications, as they may interfere with how other medicines work. Be sure to drink a full glass of water each time you take this medicine.

### ***Stool Softeners***

**Examples:** Colace®, Surfak®

**Action:** Keeps stool soft and easier to pass.

**Caution:** Keeps the consistency of stools regular; but may take a few days to get the full effect.

### ***Mineral Oil***

Take this only if advised by your doctor.

### ***Stimulants***

**Examples:** Dulcolax<sup>®</sup>, Senekot<sup>®</sup>, Ex-Lax<sup>®</sup>

**Action:** Stimulates the bowel to help push the stool forward; can be used if bulk-forming laxatives have no effect.

**Caution:** Check with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before taking these medications. They can be taken every day if needed, but do not use for longer than 1 week unless approved by your doctor or pharmacist, as they may be habit-forming. Do not take with milk products. These may cause cramps and abdominal pain, and a bowel movement may come on with little or no warning.

### ***Stool Softener and Stimulant Combined***

**Examples:** Peri-Colace<sup>®</sup>, Doxidan<sup>®</sup>, Dialose Plus<sup>®</sup>

**Action:** Softens hard stool and stimulates the bowels to help push bowel movements forward.

**Caution:** Check with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before taking these medications. They can be taken every day if needed, but do not use for longer than 1 week unless approved by your doctor or pharmacist, as they may be habit-forming. Do not take with milk products. These may cause cramps and abdominal pain, and a bowel movement may come on with little or no warning.

### ***Osmotic Laxatives***

**Examples:** Lactulose<sup>®</sup>, Golytely<sup>®</sup>, Milk of Magnesia<sup>®</sup>, Sorbitol<sup>®</sup>

**Action:** Keeps water in the bowel to soften stool.

**Caution:** Results may come on without warning. May cause gas, diarrhea and cramping. Some medications may interact with this laxative. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before using this medicine.

### ***Enema***

**Examples:** Fleets<sup>®</sup>

**Action:** Increases the amount of water in the bowel to stimulate a bowel movement.

**Caution:** This treatment usually produces a bowel movement in approximately 30 minutes. Enemas are to be used directly in the rectum and should never be taken by mouth. Take only on the advice of your doctor since this treatment may interact with certain medications and may alter your electrolyte balance.

### ***Suppository***

**Examples:** Glycerin, Dulcolax<sup>®</sup>

**Action:** Direct softening and stimulation in the rectum.

**Caution:** Take only on the advice of your doctor. This treatment may be habit forming and cause cramps.

## Fiber-Rich Foods

Actual fiber content may vary depending on brand and preparation.

<b>Fruit</b>	<b>Portion Size</b>	<b>Dietary Fiber (grams)</b>
Orange	1 medium	1.3 g
Grapes	1 cup	2.6 g
Strawberries	1 cup	2.8 g
Papaya	1 medium	2.8 g
Blackberries	1 medium	3.3 g
Apple	1 medium	3.5 g
Pear	1 medium	4.1 g
Dates	10 dates	4.2 g
Blueberries	1/2 cup	4.4 g
Raspberries	1 cup	5.8 g

<b>Cereal</b>	<b>Portion Size</b>	<b>Dietary Fiber (grams)</b>
Wheat Germ	2 Tbsp.	2 g
Quaker® Instant Oatmeal	1 packet	3 g
Wheaties®	1 cup	3 g
General Mills Basic4®	1 cup	3 g
Cheerios/Multi-grain Cheerios®	1 cup	3 g
Kellogg's® Low Fat Granola	2/3 cup	3 g
Nutri-Grain® Flakes with Raisins	1 cup	4 g
Quaker Oats®, dry	1/2 cup	4 g
Post® Fruit and Fiber	1 cup	4 g
Healthy Choice® Multigrain Cereal with Oat Clusters and Raisins	1 cup	4 g
Grape-Nuts®	1/2 cup	5 g
Total® Raisin Bran	1 cup	5 g
Post® Raisin Bran	1 cup	8 g
100% Bran	1/3 cup	8 g
Kellogg's® All Bran	1/2 cup	10 g
Kellogg's® All Bran with Extra Fiber®	1/2 cup	15 g
Flax Seed	1 Tbsp.	3 g

<b>Vegetables</b>	<b>Portion Size</b>	<b>Dietary Fiber (grams)</b>
Cauliflower	2 cups	2 g
Broccoli	1 cup	2 g
Brussels Sprouts	1 cup	2.2 g
Winter Squash	1 cup	2.4 g
Corn	1 medium	3.4 g
Mixed Vegetables (canned/frozen)	1 cup	4.2 g

<b>Dried Beans and Peas</b>	<b>Portion Size</b>	<b>Dietary Fiber (grams)</b>
Black-Eyed Peas	1/2 cup	2.2 g
Navy Beans	1/2 cup	3.3 g
Pork-n-Beans/Baked Beans	1/2 cup	3.5 g
Pinto Beans	1/2 cup	3.4 g
Black Beans	1/2 cup	3.6 g
Lentils	1/2 cup	3.9 g
Lima Beans	1/2 cup	3.9 g
Great Northern Beans	1/2 cup	4.9 g
Vegetarian Refried Beans	1/2 cup	6 g
Garbanzo Beans (Chickpeas)	1/2 cup	6 g
Kidney Beans	1/2 cup	7.3 g

<b>Others</b>	<b>Portion Size</b>	<b>Dietary Fiber (grams)</b>
Microwave Popcorn	1/2 cup	2.2 g
Tofu	1/2 cup	3.3 g

## **When Should I Call My Doctor?**

While constipation is usually due to the causes listed on page 1, sometimes it can signal a more serious health problem. Below are more concerning symptoms that can occur with constipation and should prompt a visit to your doctor:

- New, abrupt onset constipation
- Constipation that does not improve with increasing fluids, exercise and fiber intake
- Pencil thin stools
- Red blood in the stool
- Black stools
- Weight loss without trying to lose weight
- Abdominal pain

## **Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources**

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at [hlc@nm.org](mailto:hlc@nm.org), or by calling 312.926.5465. You may also visit the HLC on the 3rd floor, Galter Pavilion at 251 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at [nm.org](http://nm.org).

*Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.*

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363, the Northwestern Lake Forest Patient Relations manager at 847.535.8282 and/or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

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