

MANAGING CONSTIPATION

INFORMATION FOR OLDER ADULTS, FAMILIES,
AND CAREGIVERS



READ THIS PAMPHLET TO LEARN:

- What Constipation is.
- The Symptoms of Constipation.
- How to Help Manage Constipation.



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WHAT IS CONSTIPATION?

Constipation describes having hard stools that are difficult to pass. It occurs when digested food moves too slowly through the digestive tract and as a result, the body absorbs too much water from stool, causing it to become hard and dry.



Many age-related problems such as decreased mobility, certain medical conditions and medications, and dietary changes may increase the risk of developing constipation in older adults.

SYMPTOMS OF CONSTIPATION

- Feeling abdominal discomfort or pain
- Feeling bloated, uncomfortable
- Feeling sluggish and unable to carry on with daily activities
- Feeling unable to pass bowel movements
- Infrequent bowel movements (for example, less often than once every day)

CAUSES OF CONSTIPATION

- Dehydration or not drinking enough fluids
- Limited physical activity
- Diets high in fat or processed foods and too low in fibre
- Slower metabolism and related medical conditions that slow our metabolism
- Stress or anxiety
- Certain medications including over-the-counter medications



MANAGING CONSTIPATION

Constipation should first be treated with dietary and lifestyle changes. Below are some simple and effective changes you can make.



DRINKING MORE LIQUIDS

Drinking the right amount of fluids throughout the day will help to make stools soft and easier to pass. Older adults are more at risk of dehydration as the sensation of thirst decreases with age.



Gradually increase your liquid intake until it reaches your suggested amount. Liquids include water, juice, soup, milk, and decaffeinated tea or coffee. Hot drinks can help promote bowel activity.

Ask your doctor how much water you can drink.



EATING FIBRE-RICH FOODS

Fibre retains fluids in stool, relieving constipation. Once you have gotten your liquid intake up to the suggested amount, you can begin to incorporate high-fibre foods into your diet while limiting low-fibre and processed foods.



Most people should aim for 25 grams of fibre per day. Like liquids, fibre should be added slowly otherwise you may experience cramps, gas and diarrhea.

Fibre is found in many foods including fruit, vegetables, whole grain bread, bran bread and cereal, bran muffins, brown rice, dried fruit including prunes, and prune juice.

EXERCISE REGULARLY

Exercise causes stool to pass through the intestines faster and retain more water. Wet stools are much easier to pass. Aerobic exercises, like walking **30 minutes** each day, help stimulate the intestinal muscles to contract efficiently, passing stools quicker.



WHEN SHOULD YOU EXERCISE?

It is best to wait an hour after a meal before exercising. This allows for increased blood flow to the stomach and intestines during digestion, rather than to the heart and muscles.

WHAT EXERCISES SHOULD YOU DO?

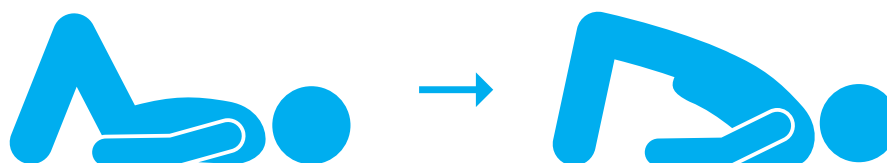
Short walks of 10-15 minutes, several times a day, can help with constipation.



Biking, swimming, or other aerobic exercises will aid in intestinal muscle contraction. These exercises are more difficult and are not for everyone. You should only attempt these exercises if you are physically able to do so.

PELVIC EXERCISES

Exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor muscle could also help relieve constipation. Many cases of chronic constipation are caused by pelvic floor dysfunction, which refers to having poor pelvic floor relaxation and abdominal wall muscle coordination.



1. To contract the main pelvic floor muscle, clench as if to prevent urination. Count to 5 as you slowly clench, hold your fully clenched position for a moment, then count to 5 as you slowly relax and release your clench. Do this 10 times.
2. Clench and hold for as long as you can. Do this 10 times. Your goal is to reach 30 second clenches.

OTHER TREATMENT OPTIONS

If dietary and lifestyle changes do not improve your symptoms, you may need additional treatment options to relieve your constipation. Several types of laxatives exist. Each works somewhat differently to make it easier to have a bowel movement. Moderate to severe constipation may require the use of more than one type of laxative. Please speak with your health care provider about your treatment options. Examples of common laxatives include:

Bulk forming laxatives (e.g. bran, psyllium):

These contain fibre and increase water and bulk volume of stool. It may be used for individuals who have a low intake of dietary fibre, and have no specific underlying causes of constipation. Each dose should be administered with at least 250 mL or 1 cup of fluids. These products should not be taken within 2 hours of taking any other medicine. Adequate fluid intake will lessen the risk of blockages in the throat and intestines.

Osmotic laxatives (e.g. lactulose, polyethylene glycol):

These are poorly absorbed sugars that draw water into the intestine to help increase bowel movements. They have been shown to be the most effective medications for treating constipation in older adults.

Stimulant laxatives (e.g. bisacodyl, senna):

This type of laxative promotes bowel movements by stimulating intestinal contractions to pass stool. They are not advised to be taken on a long-term basis (i.e. for more than 2 weeks) without advice and monitoring from your health care provider.

Saline laxatives (eg: magnesium hydroxide):

Magnesium-containing products are the most common type of saline laxative. They draw fluid into the intestine. These agents are not recommended in patients with certain heart or kidney conditions.

SPEAK WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER

Although constipation in older adults is common, it is important to speak with your health care provider about your symptoms. By discussing your symptoms with your health care provider, you can ensure there are no serious underlying health problems causing constipation and receive appropriate treatment.



Older adults should seek urgent evaluation by their health care provider if any of the following symptoms are present:

- Rectal bleeding.
- Family history of bowel cancer or inflammatory bowel disease.
- Unintentional/Unexplained Weight loss.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

HEALTH CANADA: CANADA'S FOOD GUIDE:

Canada's Food Guide provides information on how many servings of fibre-rich vegetables, fruit and grains you need in a balanced diet.



<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>

EAT RIGHT ONTARIO - RESOURCES

Eat Right Ontario features articles of high fibre diets, how to stay hydrated, and tips for healthy digestion.



www.eatrightontario.ca/en/Articles/Fibre/Constipation-in-Adults

RELEVANT RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES

- Improving Urinary Incontinence

ADDITIONAL HEALTH RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES:

- Advance Care Planning: How to Start the Conversation
- Alcohol and Your Health
- Calcium, Vitamin D and Bone Health
- General Tips for Memory Problems
- Improving Nutrition as You Age
- Living Longer, Living Well: Your Guide to Healthy Ageing
- Managing Caregiver Stress
- Managing Chronic Pain
- Managing Common Mental Health Conditions in Older Adults
- Managing Mild Cognitive Impairment, Alzheimer's Disease And Other Dementias
- Managing Multiple Chronic Health Conditions
- Managing Sedative-Hypnotic Use Among Older Adults
- Managing Sleep in Older Adults
- Managing Substance Use and Addictive Disorders As You Age
- Preventing Falls at Home
- Recognizing and Managing Anxiety
- Recognizing and Managing Delirium
- Recognizing and Managing Depression
- Recognizing and Managing Hearing Loss
- Safe Medication Use for Older Adults
- Substitute Decision Makers and Powers of Attorney
- Understanding Your Palliative Care Options

ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES:

- Community Transportation Options
- Driving Assessment Services
- Elder Abuse
- Funding for Mobility and Other Aids from the Assistive Devices Program
- Housing Options for Older Adults
- How to Register for Wheel-Trans
- Meals on Wheels

Visit www.sinaigeriatrics.ca/healtheducation for additional resources for older adults, families and caregivers.

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