

Symptoms of constipation

This leaflet gives dietary and lifestyle advice on managing the symptoms of constipation. Ask your dietitian for advice.

Your name: _____

Your dietitian: _____

Dietitian contact number: _____

Symptoms

If you are constipated, you may be experiencing the following:

- Not passing stools (faeces) as often as you normally do;
- Passing unusually hard stools;
- Having to strain more than usual;
- Feeling that your bowels have not completely emptied;
- Gas or flatulence;
- Abdominal discomfort or bloating.

Causes

Factors that increase the risk of constipation include:

- Poor fluid intake and dehydration (not drinking enough);
- Lack of fibre or bulk-forming foods in the diet;
- Being less physically active or spending more time lying down;
- Taking some vitamin or mineral supplements, e.g. iron, calcium;
- Overuse of laxatives;
- Taking certain medications, e.g. pain-relievers like morphine.

Treatment

Although laxatives can be useful as a short-term measure, try to make long term changes to diet and lifestyle to reduce constipation and maintain good bowel habits.

- **Dietary fibre:** Dietary fibre (roughage) is the indigestible part of food. It can help to increase stool bulk and prevent constipation. It is found in the following:
 - Oats, linseeds, barley, beans, peas, pulses, lentils;
 - Fruit and vegetables;
 - Whole grain and whole wheat breads, cereals and pasta, brown rice.

To prevent wind and bloating, only introduce one extra portion of fibre a day, gradually increasing this as tolerated. Remember to drink more fluid as your fibre intake increases. Check food labels for dietary fibre content – it is listed under ‘total carbohydrate’. Food with 6 grams of fibre per 100 grams is considered ‘high in fibre’. There is no upper limit of fibre, but 30g per day for adults is a good aim.

Oats and linseeds in particular may improve symptoms of constipation and some research suggests that they may also improve symptoms of wind and bloating.

If you choose to try linseeds:

- Start with 1 teaspoon and gradually build up to a maximum of 2 level tablespoons a day;
- Drink an extra 200mls / third of a pint of fluid with every tablespoon of linseeds;
- Add to foods such as breakfast cereals, yoghurts and soups;
- Give your bowels time to adjust; this may take up to 3 to 6 months.

● **Fluid:**

- It is important to drink extra fluid if you are increasing your fibre intake. Fibre soaks up water in the gut and makes stools softer and easier to pass.
- Aim to drink at least 8 cups (1.5-2 litres / 3-5 pints) of water or non-caffeinated drinks such as herbal teas, hot water and lemon, fruit and vegetable juices, and squash with no added sugar daily.
- Restrict intake of caffeinated drinks e.g. tea, coffee, cola, to no more than 3 cups per day.
- Reduce your intake of alcohol and fizzy drinks.

- **Natural laxatives:** Natural remedies such as syrup of figs, rhubarb, papaya, prunes or prune juice have been found to improve symptoms in some patients. You can also sprinkle small amounts of bran on cereal or add to cooking and baking.

- **Probiotics:** Probiotics are good bacteria found in certain food products and also as supplements. They can help improve the balance of bacteria in the gut. There are a range of different probiotic products available, each containing different types and quantities of bacteria. If you choose to try a probiotic you should use the product as directed by the manufacturer for a minimum of 4 weeks, monitoring the effect on your symptoms. If a product does not appear to have any effect, then consider trying a different brand.

- **Physical activity:** Regular physical activity can help in the prevention of constipation.
- Aim to do a minimum of 30 minutes every day.
 - Try walking, gardening, swimming, dancing, other sporting activities, or regular chores such as vacuuming.

- **Lifestyle:** Identifying a routine of a place and time of day when you are comfortably able to spend time in the toilet can encourage the bowel into a regular working pattern. A warm drink with breakfast can also help.

Try to respond to your bowel’s natural pattern, meaning when you feel the urge, don’t delay. When you go to the toilet, propping your feet on a low stool so that your knees are above your hips, can make passing stools easier.

Your recommendations

Please follow this advice for the period of time agreed with your dietitian.

Goals identified for you include:

1.
2.
3.

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Produced by Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust Dietitians

Reviewed: September 2022. Next review due: September 2024.