

Constipation: How (and Why) to Increase the Amount of Fiber in Your Diet

What is constipation and how do I know if I have it?

Constipation is the difficult (and sometimes painful) passage of small, hard, dry stools usually less than three times per week. Other symptoms may include sluggishness, bloating, cramping and a general feeling of discomfort.

Some people may believe they have constipation if they do not have a bowel movement everyday. In fact, bowel movements are highly variable and range from three times per day to three times per week, depending on the person.

Who gets constipated?

At some point in our lives everyone gets constipated. In most cases it is temporary and not serious. Understanding the causes of constipation, it's prevention and treatment will help most people find relief.

What causes constipation?

Common causes are:

- not enough fiber in diet
- not enough liquids
- not enough exercise
- medications
- irritable bowel syndrome
- changes in life or routine such as pregnancy, older age and travel
- abuse of laxatives
- ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- specific diseases such as stroke (common)
- problems with the colon and rectum
- problems with intestinal function

Why should I eat more fiber?

Eating foods high in fiber (and drinking plenty of water) helps to relieve problems and prevent recurrence of constipation.

Eating a well balanced diet with 25-35 g of fiber a day, recommended by the American Dietetic Association, helps form a soft, bulky stool.

How can I get more fiber in my diet?

Try these easy suggestions:



- ✓ Eat 5 – 9 servings of fruits and vegetables each day for better health. A serving size of a fruit or vegetable is the amount that fits in the palm of your hand. Some high-fiber examples;

Apples	Brussel sprouts	Corn
Asparagus	Cabbage	Oranges
Beans	Carrots	Prunes
Broccoli		

- ✓ Don't forget your grains!

100% Whole-wheat bread	Bran muffins	Oatmeal
Bran cereals	Brown rice	Popcorn

References:

1. Nexium Research Fiber and Constipation page. http://www.nexiumresearch.com/constipation_fiber.html. Viewed April 4, 2005.
2. National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse. <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/constipation/> Viewed April 4, 2005.
3. 5 a day for better health program. <http://www.5aday.gov/what/index.html>. Viewed April 4, 2005.

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- ✓ Limit foods with little or no fiber (especially if prone to constipation).

Cheese	Instant mashed potatoes	Prepared frozen dinners
Chips	Meat	
Ice cream	Pizza	

Why should I drink plenty of water?



Increasing the amount of water you drink to at least eight 8 oz glasses per day is an easy way to ease constipation symptoms and critical when adding any source of fiber into your diet.

Why should I exercise?



Lack of exercise can lead to constipation. Even short amounts of daily activity can improve bowel function, as well as benefit other health conditions.

Which medications can I ask my pharmacist about?

Some medications that may cause constipation are:

- antacids containing aluminum and calcium
- anticonvulsants
- antidepressants
- antiparkinson drugs
- antispasmodics
- blood pressure medications (such as calcium channel blockers)
- diuretics
- iron supplements
- pain medications (especially narcotics)

How can fiber dietary supplements help?

If you can not eat all the daily servings recommended for high fiber foods or if you do not get relief from constipation, fiber supplements may help.

Fiber supplements should be introduced slowly into your diet over a period of several days to weeks to help your body adjust. Adding too much of a fiber supplement into your diet too quickly can cause bloating, gas and diarrhea. Making sure to drink at least 8-10 glasses of water a day prevents fiber supplements from worsening constipation.

(Note: People with narrowings or scar tissue of their intestines should not use fiber supplements until it has been discussed with their physician. Also, some fiber laxatives contain sugar; diabetic patients may need to select sugarless products.)

Who can I ask if I have questions?

Your community or hospital pharmacist is a great resource when it comes to answering your questions about health and medications. Also, your primary care physician and a registered dietician can give valuable diet, medication and health information.

For more information:

Attend your local community's 9 News Health Fair this April 16-24, 2005 or visit their website at www.9healthfair.org.

References:

1. Nexium Research Fiber and Constipation page. http://www.nexiumresearch.com/constipation_fiber.html. Viewed April 4, 2005.
2. National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse. <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/constipation/> Viewed April 4, 2005.
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