

# Constipation

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if your stools – or, less formally, *poo* – are too hard and/or difficult to pass (known as constipation). It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

## Useful facts

- **What is constipation?** Constipation is when your stools become hard and you find it more difficult than usual, or even painful, to pass them when going to the toilet. You may also have a feeling of being unable to completely empty your bowel. Opening your bowels may be more difficult because your stools are hard, lumpy and dry, or because they are abnormally small or large.
- **Other symptoms** Constipation may be accompanied by feeling bloated or sick, losing your appetite, and aches or cramps in your abdomen.
- **How common is it?** You're not alone – constipation is very common (particularly in women and older people) and affects an estimated one to two out of 10 people at any one time.
- **Common causes** These include not eating enough fibre (contained in cereals, vegetables and fruit), changing your eating habits, ignoring the urge to go to the toilet, not drinking enough fluids, not getting enough exercise – and, perhaps surprisingly, also mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. Certain medications, such as *opiates*, *diuretics* and *antidepressants* may also cause you to become constipated.

## What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **Normal stool frequency** We're all different when it comes to bowel habits – some of us pass stools only every three or four days, whereas others may go more than once a day.
- ✓ **Constipation is usually harmless** Being constipated once in a while is common and usually completely harmless.
- ✓ **Duration** In most cases, constipation is short-lived and settles within a few days – or 2 to 4 weeks at the most.
- ✓ **Investigations** There is usually no need for any investigations or procedures, because the diagnosis can often be made based on the symptoms alone.

## What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **Healthy diet** Increasing your daily fibre intake by eating a higher proportion of fruit, vegetables, seeds, pulses and cereals, or by taking soluble fibre in the form of oats, can help to alleviate symptoms and prevent symptoms from recurring. These food stuffs that make your stools softer and bulkier, and thereby easier to pass.
- ✓ **Hydration** Avoid dehydration and drink plenty of water.
- ✓ **Exercise** Try to exercise more, which helps your bowels digest food.
- ✓ **Listen to your body** Respond to your bowel's natural pattern and do not delay going to the toilet when you feel the urge to go.
- ✓ **Pain relief** Simple pain killers such as *paracetamol* can help to relieve pain
- ✓ **Medicines to ease constipation** Many preparations are available over the counter to help you open your bowels. These include bulk-forming preparations, stool softeners, bowel stimulants and suppositories (bullet-shaped dissolvable preparations that you can insert into the opening of your back passage). Speak to your pharmacist for advice if you're not sure which medicine is best for you, or check out <http://www.medicinechestonline.com>.

## When should I seek medical help?

In *rare* cases, more serious underlying causes can make you constipated. See your GP if you notice any of the following:

- **Duration** You've been constipated or have a persistent feeling of not being able to empty your bowel completely that doesn't go away within six weeks.
- **Other symptoms** Your tummy becomes increasingly swollen, and/or you start vomiting, which could suggest that your bowels are blocked.
- **Age** You're over 50 and have never suffered from constipation before.
- **Medication** You think that a medication makes you constipated.
- **Blood in your stools** You notice blood in your stools, particularly if you don't have any pain or discomfort around the opening of your back passage.
- **'General' symptoms** You've been losing weight for no apparent reason; you also feel tired all the time, 'not quite right', sweaty or feverish; or you find that these symptoms don't go away within four to six weeks.

## Where can I find out more?

**NHS Choices** (<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Constipation/Pages/Introduction.aspx>) and the **Choose Well** website ([www.choosewellmanchester.org.uk/self-care](http://www.choosewellmanchester.org.uk/self-care)) provide further useful information about constipation. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms.

