

Constipation

WHAT IS IT?

Having fewer than three bowel movements a week is, technically, the definition of constipation. However, how often you “go” varies widely from person to person. Some people have bowel movements several times a day while others have them only one to two times a week.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Common lifestyle causes of constipation include:

- Eating foods low in fiber.
- Not drinking enough water ([dehydration](#)).
- Not getting enough exercise.
- Changes in your regular routine, such as traveling or eating or going to bed at different times.
- Eating large amounts of milk or cheese.
- Stress.
- Resisting the urge to have a bowel movement.
- Many drugs can cause constipation. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of constipation include:

- You have fewer than three bowel movements a week.
- Your stools are dry, hard and/or lumpy.
- Your stools are difficult or painful to pass.
- You have a stomach ache or cramps.
- You feel bloated and nauseous.
- You feel that you haven’t completely emptied your bowels after a movement.

WHEN TO SEEK MEDICAL CARE:

- Symptoms are present for more than 3 weeks or do not improve after 1 - 2 weeks with self care.

SELF CARE

- Drink two to four extra glasses of water a day. Avoid caffeine-containing drinks and alcohol, which can cause dehydration.
- Add fruits, vegetables whole grains and other high-fiber foods to your diet. Eat fewer high-fat foods, like meat, eggs and cheese.
- Eat prunes and/or bran cereal.
- Get moving, exercise.
- Check how you sit on the toilet. Raising your feet, leaning back or squatting may make having a bowel movement easier.
- Add an over-the-counter supplemental fiber to your diet (like Metamucil®, Citrucel®, and Benefiber®).
- If needed, take a very mild over-the-counter stool softener or laxative (such as docusate [Colace®] or Milk of Magnesia®). Stimulant laxatives, like bisacodyl (Dulcolax®) or senna (Senokot®), are other options. Do not use laxatives for more than two weeks without calling your medical provider. Overuse of laxatives can worsen your symptoms.

The information presented here is not intended to be used for the diagnosis of a health problem or as a substitute for consulting a licensed medical professional.