

# 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.**