



Managing Constipation with Diet: Adults

What is constipation?

Constipation is when you have bowel movements (stools) that are hard to pass or happen less often than what is usual for you. You may feel like you have to have a bowel movement but are not able to. Constipation can cause belly pain and bloating (gas) and make you feel unwell.

Normal bowel movements are soft and pass easily through your body.

Do I need to have a bowel movement every day?

No. Not everyone has a bowel movement every day. Some people might go 3 times per day. Others might have 2 to 3 bowel movements per week. Everyone has their own pattern.

What causes constipation?

Constipation can occur with:

- overuse of laxatives (stool softeners);
- ignoring the urge when you have to go;
- stress;
- pregnancy;
- a change in regular routine or travelling;
- not eating enough fibre;
- not drinking enough fluids;
- not getting enough physical activity;
- use of medications such as antacids with aluminum or calcium, antidepressants, antihistamines, narcotics (such as codeine), antispasmodics, diuretics, tranquilizers, some heart medications;
- use of supplements such as iron and calcium; and
- health conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome, colorectal cancer, eating disorders, underactive thyroid, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, celiac disease, and depression.

When should I see a health care provider?

See your health care provider if any of the following happen:

- there is a sudden change in your bowel movements without a change in your daily routine;
- you have been constipated for several days and diet changes have not helped;
- you have intense pain in your belly or rectum;
- you have blood in your stool;
- you have unexplained weight loss; or
- you have constipation that alternates with diarrhea.

What are the possible complications?

Possible complications from constipation include:

- hemorrhoids;
- cracks or tears in the rectum;
- weakening of the muscles and ligament that hold the rectum in place; and
- blockage of stool in the large intestine.

How can my diet help with constipation?

Fibre and fluids work together to keep your bowel movements regular. Fibre-rich foods hold liquid in your stools to keep them soft. Specific foods do not cause constipation, or make it worse. A diet low in fibre and fluid may lead to constipation.

Constipation can be helped by eating a diet that is higher in fibre and by drinking lots of fluids.

Aim to drink 2 to 2.5 litres (8 to 10 cups) of fluid every day. Water is the best choice.

Add fibre to your diet gradually. A sudden increase in fibre can cause cramps and gas. When you eat more fibre, remember to drink more fluids.

Which foods have fibre?

Eating foods that are high in fibre is recommended for overall health. Fibre is found in most plant-based foods. These include:

- vegetables and fruit, including dried fruit (cooking or processing does not decrease the amount of fibre in fruits and vegetables, whole fruits have more fibre than fruit juices with pulp);
- whole grain and whole wheat products, such as breads, cereals, pasta, brown rice, oats, oat bran, barley and quinoa;
- legumes (cooked dried peas, beans, and lentils); and
- nuts and seeds.

You can also boost the fibre in your diet by adding 15 to 30 mL (1 to 2 tablespoons) of chia seeds, ground flax seeds, or bran (wheat, rice or oat) into hot cereal, meat loaf, casseroles, or baking.

Read nutrition labels to find out the amount of fibre in the foods you eat. High fibre foods have 4 grams of fibre or more per serving.

If you are at risk for a bowel obstruction check with your health care provider about whether a high fibre diet is suitable for you.

Can eating prunes or drinking prune juice help constipation?

Yes. Prunes and prune juice contain sorbitol, which is a naturally occurring sugar alcohol. Prunes and prune juice are best used in combination with a diet high in fibre and fluids.

Fruit lax can also help with constipation. Try this recipe.

Fruit lax recipe

Combine and soak the following ingredients overnight:

- 250 mL (1 cup) prunes
- 250 mL (1 cup) raisins
- 250 mL (1 cup) dates
- 125 mL (1/2 cup) orange juice
- 150 mL (2/3 cup) prune juice
- 250 mL (1 cup) of wheat bran (optional)

The next day, blend until spreadable. It can be used on toast or mixed into hot cereal or plain yogurt. Fruit lax will keep for two weeks in the fridge, or it can be frozen.

Can I use laxatives to help with constipation?

Laxatives are substances that can help relieve constipation. However the long-term use of laxatives can make your body depend on them. Talk to your health care provider about the use of laxatives to manage your constipation.

Fibre supplements are widely available and can be found in forms such as powders, tablets and capsules. If you have trouble eating enough fibre and want to use fibre supplements, check with your health care provider first.

Diet changes are less likely to improve your constipation if your constipation is caused by a medication or a medical condition. If you are pregnant, it is important to always talk to your health care provider before taking any new medications, including laxatives.

For more nutrition information, call **8-1-1** to speak with a registered dietitian.

For More Information

For more information on fibre and your diet, see [HealthLinkBC File #68h Fibre and Your Health](#).

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