

Constipation

The primary concern with constipation is not how frequently you have a bowel movement; rather, it's how difficult it is to pass the stools when you are finally able to go. For some people, it's normal to pass stools as often as three times a day; for others, it's normal to go only three times a week. Regardless of how often you go—if your stools are soft and pass easily—you are *not* constipated. The best rule is to go when you feel the urge. However, if you ignore this urge, the stools will eventually become dry and difficult to pass.

Constipation may occur with cramping and pain in the rectum caused by straining to pass hard, dry stools. There may also be some bloating and nausea and even small amounts of bright red blood on the stools. This sort of “spotting” is usually caused by slight tearing of the anus as the stools are pushed through it. The bleeding should stop when the constipation is relieved.

Constipation is often due to a lack of fiber or inadequate water in the diet. For some people, milk causes constipation. Other causes include travel, lack of exercise, delaying a bowel movement, pain due to hemorrhoids, laxative overuse, irritable bowel syndrome, or certain medications (such as codeine). Generally, the constipation clears up when the medication is discontinued.

The best way to prevent constipation is through your dietary habits. Eat plenty of high-fiber foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Try to eat fruits with edible skins and seeds, such as apples, apricots, blackberries, figs, peaches, prunes, plums, pears, and strawberries. Also, try to eat more raw or lightly cooked vegetables, such as artichokes, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, celery, eggplant, green peppers, lettuce, mushrooms, radishes, spinach, and other green leafy vegetables. Avoid foods that are high in fat and sugar and drink between 1 ½ to 2 quarts of water and other fluids every day.

Exercise can also help get your system going. If regular exercise is not currently part of your lifestyle, you should call your medical professional to discuss the type of exercise that may be most helpful for you. Establishing a regular walking routine, for instance, is often a great way to begin.

If you already have a good diet and exercise program established—but are still constipated—consider taking some other measures. For example, set a definite time each day for having a bowel movement. This should be a time when you can relax and are not pressured to hurry—perhaps following your after-breakfast walk. If necessary, use a bulk forming agent, such as Citrucel or Metamucil. Follow the instructions on the label, but don't expect results for several days. These are safe to use every day and for the long term. If you prefer, you can use a very mild laxative, such as Milk of Magnesia. However, don't use a laxative (including mineral oil) for more than two weeks without consulting your medical professional.

If your child is under the age of two and is constipated, make sure that you're adding the right amount of water to the baby's formula. It's also a good idea to give 1 to 2 ounces of water before feeding. After the age of 6 months, give 1/2 tablespoon to 2 tablespoons of prune juice. Increase the amount slowly over time. At age 9 months, add between 1 ½ to 3 tablespoons of strained prunes every day. If an infant or child is showing rectal pain, a warm bath with 2 ounces of baking soda in the tub may relax the muscles and allow the stool to pass.

Call your medical professional if constipation does not respond to one week of home treatment. Also call if you experience sharp abdominal pain or rectal bleeding that persists for two or three days after the constipation has improved. If you experience stool leakage (fecal incontinence), stools that are consistently narrow (no wider than a pencil), or if you are unable to have bowel movements without using laxatives, make sure to call your doctor or other medical professional.

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For more health information ...

- Connect to our Web site at *members.kp.org*. The Health encyclopedia has in-depth information on “Constipation, Age 12 and Older” and “Constipation, Age 11 and Younger.”
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility’s Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

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