



# Constipation

## **What is constipation?**

It is an irregular bowel habit where the stools are often harder and dryer than normal, making them difficult and often painful to pass.

## **What makes the stool hard or dry?**

Your digestive tract is one continuous tube that breaks down food products in a step-by-step process. Each part has a job to do.

The colon, large intestine, has the job of absorbing excess water from the waste and moving it to the rectum so it can be expelled. When colonic contractions, peristalsis, are disturbed the waste material either moves too slowly allowing lots of water absorption and so the stool becomes too hard and dry, constipation, or moves too rapidly and is soft and watery, diarrhoea.

## **What causes constipation?**

The peristalsis of the colon has been disturbed for some reason such as stress, medication, pregnancy, illness, resisting the urge to defecate, pain from haemorrhoids or fissures, lack of exercise, a low fibre diet or not drinking enough fluids. You may have irritable bowel syndrome, IBS, or some other chronic condition. It may even be caused by overuse of stimulant laxatives or enemas.

## **Does constipation need investigation?**

Any change in bowel habit like constipation should be investigated, as occasionally this can be a symptom of more serious conditions like bowel cancer. Colonoscopy is the most accurate test available for the large bowel and can identify or eliminate other more serious causes of constipation, especially in the older age group.

## **How can I become regular and stay that way?**

You may need to make some simple changes in your lifestyle.

- Eat regular meals
- Drink plenty of fluids, especially water, but also milk, fruit and vegetable juice and soup
- Exercise daily, such as walking, cycling or swimming
- Respond to the urge to move your bowels. If you delay you may have to strain later

- Avoid straining. It may cause irritation and haemorrhoids
- Add fibre to your diet. Fibre is undigested plant residue which adds bulk to help keep things moving through your intestines. Fibre also holds water and tends to soften the stool.

Most westerners average only half the recommended daily fibre intake because the foods we typically eat are so highly processed and the natural fibre is removed.

A high fibre diet concentrating on vegetable, fruits, grains and cereals is recommended. If this is still not adequate for you proprietary fibre products are available. Ask your doctor for advice on this.

There are many other forms of laxatives. Another useful group is the osmotic products like Lactulose, which also are unabsorbed and therefore draw water into the bowel, softening the stool. In general laxatives in pill, tablet or enema form are irritants and should not be used in the long term. They sometimes have a short term use but only on the advice of your doctor as they can habituate the colon.

For further information:  
[www.corecharity.org.uk](http://www.corecharity.org.uk)

