

# CONSTIPATION

Constipation is a condition in which you don't pass stools (poo) as often as you usually do. Your poo may be hard and lumpy, and much larger or smaller than usual. It may be difficult and painful for you to poo, and you may get cramping pains in the lower part of your tummy. If you have severe constipation, you may also feel bloated and sick.

Several things can give rise to constipation, including:

- not eating enough fibre, such as fruit, vegetables or cereals
- changing the type of food you eat, for example, eating more processed foods
- not drinking enough water or other fluids
- ignoring the urge to poo.

Some medicines can cause constipation, including the painkillers codeine and morphine, some antidepressants, iron tablets and some medicines for indigestion called antacids. Speak to your pharmacist if you think your medicines may be making you constipated.

Some medical conditions can cause constipation, for example, an underactive thyroid, irritable bowel syndrome, and conditions that make the gut move slowly.

Constipation is more common in people who are anxious or depressed. During pregnancy, the gut may move more slowly than usual which can cause constipation.

## How can I treat constipation?

Start by making changes to your diet and lifestyle:

- Gradually increase the amount of fibre you eat, for example, eating bread made with wholemeal flour (also called wholewheat or wholegrain flour), wholegrain breakfast cereals, brown rice, wholemeal pasta, and fruit and vegetables. Aim to eat at least 5 different types of fruit and vegetables each day.
- Try to drink at least 2 litres of fluid each day (about 8-10 cups).
- Try to get more exercise, for example, by going for a daily walk. Exercise helps to get your gut moving.
- Avoid alcohol because it dehydrates you, even though it's a fluid.

If diet and lifestyle changes don't work for you, then a **laxative** may help. When choosing a laxative, you need to think about your symptoms, any medical conditions you may have and any medicines you are taking. Your pharmacist will advise you on the best treatment for you.

Most laxatives may cause bloating, flatulence and some tummy pain but this gets better over time. Keep drinking plenty of water while you're taking the laxative. Stop taking the laxative when your poo becomes easier to pass again.

**Ispaghula husk** (for example, **Fybogel**) is a bulk-forming laxative that helps your poo to retain fluid, making it softer and easier to pass. Only use this laxative occasionally and for a few days at a time. Before starting treatment with ispaghula husk tell your pharmacist if you have diabetes or a thyroid condition.

- The usual dose for adults is 1 sachet of granules mixed with at least 150ml (1/4 pint) of cold water 2 times a day.
- Stir well until all the granules have dissolved, then drink straight away.
- Take the evening dose at least 1 hour before going to bed.
- It may take 2 to 3 days for the granules to work.
- If you're taking any other medicines, take them 30 to 60 minutes before or after you take the ispaghula husk granules.

**Lactulose** is an osmotic laxative that softens your poo, making it easier to pass. Your pharmacist may recommend it if you still have symptoms after trying ispaghula husk or if you cannot take ispaghula husk. Before starting treatment with lactulose, tell your pharmacist if you have lactose intolerance or galactosaemia (a rare condition that stops your body metabolising a sugar called galactose).

- Adults can take between 15ml and 45ml of lactulose 1 or 2 times a day.
- This dose can be reduced to between 15ml and 30ml 1 or 2 times a day after it starts working.
- It takes a couple of days for lactulose to work.

**Senna, bisacodyl** or **docusate sodium** are stimulant laxatives that work by stimulating the gut muscles to help move the poo along your bowel. Docusate sodium also softens poo. Your pharmacist may recommend these laxatives if you still have symptoms after trying an osmotic laxative, or if you are taking painkillers such as morphine or codeine.

Only use a stimulant laxative for a few days. If you take it for any longer then your bowel may start to rely on it rather than working on its own. Before starting treatment tell your pharmacist if you are taking other medicines, have a heart problem or other gut problem because these laxatives may not be suitable for you.

- Adults can take 1 senna or 1 bisacodyl tablet at bedtime.
- If this is not working then increase the dose to 2 tablets at bedtime.
- If you are taking bisacodyl then leave a gap of 1 hour before drinking milk or before taking antacids or medicines called proton pump inhibitors (for example, omeprazole and lansoprazole).
- For docusate sodium, take up to 5 capsules in a day, if needed.

## What else can help?

- If you have constipation and are in pain take paracetamol for a couple of days.
- Work out a place and a time of day when you can easily spend time on the toilet. Respond to your body: when you feel the urge to go to the toilet, don't delay.
- Try resting your feet on a low stool while you are using the toilet. Having your knees above the level of your hips can make it easier to poo.

## Do I need to see my doctor?

See your doctor if:

- you've made changes to your diet and lifestyle and used laxatives for more than 7 days, but you still have constipation
- your child is constipated
- you notice blood in your stools
- you've lost weight without meaning to, or you have a temperature, or are tired all the time
- you are being sick (vomiting)
- your tummy hurts, or it's becoming more and more swollen
- you have diarrhoea as well as constipation
- you are over 60 and being constipated is unusual for you
- you think that the medicines you're taking are making you constipated.

## Where can I find further information?

NHS Choices: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

NHS Direct Wales: [www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)

NHS Direct Wales Tel: 0845 4647 (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Calls from landlines and mobiles cost 2p per minute, in addition to telephone providers access charge.