

Constipation – Is It Really A Problem?

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How many people admit to being constipated? It’s not something we normally bring up in a social conversation.

Yet, more than 4 million Americans have recurrent constipation. This accounts for more than 2.5 million visits to health care professionals.

For constipation! It’s no wonder health care costs and health care insurance premiums have escalated.

Most people self-treat their constipation with over-the-counter (OTC) laxatives. Each year, \$725 million is spent on laxatives in America alone.

Constipation is defined as having a bowel movement less than three times in a week. Stools are usually dry, hard, small in size and very difficult to pass.

While not a disease, constipation is a symptom. Usually a poor diet is the culprit, with temporary constipation resulting. If you suffer from chronic constipation, however, you should see a health care professional. It can be a symptom of a more serious condition.

Constipation is the result of the colon absorbing too much water from the waste material in your colon, or from sluggish muscle contractions in the colon causing the stool to move too slowly through the colon. In either case, the stools become hard and dry.

Causes of constipation can include:

- Not enough fiber in the diet
- Lack of exercise
- Dehydration
- Certain medications (for example, narcotics, calcium-channel blockers, iron supplements or non-magnesium antacids)
- Dairy products
- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Laxative abuse
- Pregnancy
- Aging
- Change in routine (for example, illness or travel)
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Other diseases or conditions (for example, stroke)

The most common causes of constipation are a diet low in fiber (processed and fast foods), a diet high in fats (cheese, eggs, meats) and/or a lack of exercise.

Americans typically eat less than half (in many cases only a quarter) of what the American Dietetic Association recommends. Their recommendation is 20-35 grams of fiber daily.

The bulking agent of choice appears to be a soluble fiber taken from the Psyllium plant. When taken with plenty of water, this forms a jelly-like substance that helps soften the stool and pushes the accumulated waste product out of the colon.

Drinking plenty of liquids like water or juice will keep the body hydrated and add bulk to stools, which makes the stool softer and easier to pass. **Please note that liquids containing caffeine (coffee, tea, and cola) or alcohol will actually cause dehydration. Avoid these as a means of hydrating the body.

The clinical definition of constipation is any two (2) of the following - for at least 12 weeks (does not have to be consecutive) out of a 12 month period:

- lumpy, hard stool
- straining during bowel movements
- feeling of incomplete emptying
- feeling of blockage
- less than three bowel movements in a week

While constipation can be uncomfortable, it’s not usually serious. If you don’t want to contribute to the more than \$700 million spent on laxatives each year in the U.S., your best means of prevention is plenty of fiber, water and exercise.