

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation means having a hard, dry bowel motion (faeces) that is difficult to pass. It may cause straining, pain and discomfort. There may be slight bleeding from a small tear in the anus (outside of the back passage).

Constipation is common, affecting one in five people.

Everyone has different toilet habits. Some people use their bowels a couple of times a day to once every three days or so. As we get older most of us can expect to go less frequently.

You are not constipated unless your bowel habits change.

What causes constipation?

There are some common causes of constipation.

- Not drinking enough water
- A diet low in fibre (roughage)
- Lack of exercise
- Waiting too long to go to the toilet
- Pregnancy
- Older age
- Medication – including using too many laxatives or taking strong pain medications
- Chronic illness – including certain bowel conditions and depression
- Changing routine – travel/work hours

What are the symptoms?

- Straining and pain on passing a hard bowel motion
- No bowel movement for several days
- Cramping stomach pains
- Bloating and flatulence
- Nausea
- General feeling of ill health
- Minor bleeding from a tear in the skin around the anus (outside of the back passage)

Treatment

There are a few options, and your doctor will choose the right one for you.

- Laxatives such as prune juice, Metamucil®, Lactulose®, Coloxyl®, Movicol® and liquid paraffin help to soften the bowel motion. These are taken by mouth (orally).
- Suppositories such as glycerol or Dulcolax® are inserted into the rectum (into the back passage)
- Enemas such as Microlax®, which is a special liquid inserted into the rectum

Follow your doctor's advice with care. Laxatives should only be used for short periods of time, unless otherwise instructed.

Home care

There are some simple measures that can help combat constipation:

- Drink plenty of water
- Slowly increase the amount of fibre you eat (such as cereals, wholegrain bread, vegetables and fruit). There is little fibre in most 'junk' foods.
- Exercise more. Begin by going for a brisk 30-minute walk every day, five days a week and increase this as you get fitter.
- Set aside enough time to go to the toilet
- Go to the toilet when you feel the urge. Do not 'hold on'.
- Review any medications with your local doctor or pharmacist
- Raise knees above hips when sitting on the toilet by placing feet on a foot stool

What to expect

While constipation can cause discomfort, most people can be treated with simple measures. A few people may need further tests to look for underlying health problems.

If constipation is ongoing it can lead to haemorrhoids (swollen veins of the rectum or anus), a hernia (caused by organs such as the intestine pushing through a weak section of the abdominal wall/muscles) or an anal fissure (a small tear in the lining of the anus). If the bowel becomes too full this may lead to a bowel obstruction that may need hospital treatment.

Prevention

A high fibre intake is a good lifelong habit for everybody. Combine this with plenty of fluids and daily exercise. Go to the toilet regularly, especially when you feel the urge to.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

See your local doctor or healthcare professional if you:

- Have **bowel motions that contain blood**
- Experience **bloating, vomiting or stomach pain**
- Increase your intake of fibre and fluids but your constipation **does not improve**

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au