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 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. 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).
- A lack of exercise.
- Waiting too long to go to the toilet.
- Pregnancy.
- Older age.
- Medication – including using too many laxatives.
- 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.
- Not feeling hungry/weight loss.
- 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*, *Coloxy*, and liquid paraffin help to soften the bowel motion. These are taken by mouth (orally).
- **Suppositories** – such as glycerine or *Durolax*. These are special ‘tablets’ which are inserted into rectum (the back passage).
- **Enemas** – such as *Microlax*, which is a special liquid which is 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.

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 or a hernia. If the bowel becomes too full this may lead to a bowel obstruction that may need hospital treatment.
Emergency Department Patient Information

CONSTIPATION

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.

Notes:

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 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.

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 000).

See your local doctor or return to Cabrini Emergency Department 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 9508 1500
• Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
• Visit the Better Health Channel
  www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Acknowledgement: Cabrini Health would like to thank the Victorian Government Department of Health for the permission to reproduce this material prepared in December 2010 as part of the Emergency Care Improvement and Innovation Clinical Network Emergency Department factsheet series, available at: www.health.vic.gov.au/edfactsheets