

No one likes to be constipated. For some of us, it happens only once in a while. For others, it's a chronic problem.

Did you know?

- Being constipated means that you pass hard stools. You may also feel bloated or sluggish. You may have cramps.
- Being "regular" means that your stools are easy to pass.
- Most people become constipated if they go more than three days between bowel movements. But not everyone. The number of days between bowel movements can vary greatly from person to person and still be normal.
- Chronic constipation can cause hemorrhoids and anal fissures. Hemorrhoids are painful, swollen veins in the lower part of the anus. (The anus is the opening through which stools pass out of the body.) Anal fissures are cuts or tears in the lining of the anus.

The causes of constipation include:

- A change in your eating habits or usual bathroom time
- Lack of physical activity
- Travel
- Repeatedly ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Illness or surgery
- Some medical conditions (Examples are strokes, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injuries, diabetes, underactive thyroid, too much calcium in the blood, lupus, and scleroderma.)
- Disorders of the colon or rectum, including tumors, scar tissue, and problems with the hormones, nerves, or muscles that affect the colon
- Taking a medicine that affects the bowels, such as:
 - Pain medicines, especially narcotics like codeine, morphine, and oxycodone
 - Some antidepressants
 - Tranquilizers
 - Antacids that contain aluminum or calcium
 - Calcium-channel blockers to control blood pressure
 - Diuretics
 - Iron and calcium supplements
 - Anti-Parkinson drugs
 - Anticonvulsants and antispasmodics

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Important: Always talk with your doctor if you have a change in your bowel habits that you can't explain. An example would be having hard stools, many days apart, after many years of daily, easy-to-pass stools. There may be a serious cause.

Below are some tips for staying "regular." Check those you might like to try:

- Set up a regular time each day to use the bathroom.**
- Be active every day.** Walk, bike, swim, or jog. Do what you enjoy.
- Get enough fiber.** Fiber is the part of plant foods you can't digest. It adds bulk and texture to stools. That makes them easier to pass. Experts recommend that adults eat 25-38 grams of fiber per day. Most Americans get less than half that amount. Increase the amount of fiber you eat slowly. This will prevent any bloating or gas while your body adjusts. Ways to get more fiber include:
 - **Eat dried beans and peas.** Enjoy chili made with beans. Try bean, split pea, or lentil soups. Add chickpeas to salads. Make burritos with beans. Try bean dips.
 - **Eat more fruit, especially berries and fruits with peels you can eat.** Top cereal or nonfat/low-fat yogurt with sliced fruit. Eat fruit or fruit salad for snacks and dessert.
 - **Eat more vegetables.** Try different vegetable soups. Add vegetables to sandwiches. Keep cut-up raw vegetables in the fridge for snacks. Eat two cooked vegetables and a salad for dinner. These vegetables are fiber stars: broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, corn, eggplant, kale, onions, potatoes, spinach, summer squash, sweet peppers, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes.
 - **Eat more whole grains.** Swap white bread for whole grain bread. Find a bran cereal you like. Eat brown rice instead of white rice.
 - **It is best to get your fiber from a variety of plant-based foods.** Different plants and parts of plants contain different types of fiber. All types help prevent constipation.
 - **It is best to get your fiber from foods.** Foods contain many other nutrients that are good for your health.
 - **What if you eat a high-fiber diet and are still constipated?** You may want to try a supplement. An example is psyllium. Add it to your diet slowly over time. Allow several weeks or months for it to work.
- Eat prunes or drink prune juice.** Both contain a natural laxative.
- Drink plenty of fluids.** Fiber is not digested, and fluids help it move through the digestive track. Aim for at least eight glasses per day of water or other fluids with no calories. Limit drinks with caffeine or alcohol since they have a dehydrating effect.

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Preventing Constipation

Talk with your doctor before you use laxatives or enemas. They can get in the way of normal digestion. They can also be habit forming.

Don't take mineral oil without your doctor's okay. It keeps your body from absorbing certain vitamins and drugs. It can also cause a serious lung problem in anyone who may have trouble swallowing. This includes infants, children, and older adults.

Take Action

Choose two of the tips above. Make a plan to try them this week:



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