

Constipation Advice for Patients



Patient Information

What is constipation?

Constipation is a common problem. It means either going to the toilet less often than usual to empty the bowels or passing hard or painful stools (faeces). Constipation may be caused by not eating enough fibre, or not drinking enough fluids. It can also be a side-effect of certain medicines or related to an underlying medical condition.

Normal Bowel Function

The bowel is part of the digestive system, and its role is to digest the food that we eat, absorb the goodness and nutrients from the digested food into the bloodstream and then to process and expel the waste products from the food that the body cannot use. This process starts at the mouth and finishes at the anus or back passage.

Food passes through the intestine. Nutrients from digested food are absorbed into the bloodstream. The remaining undigested food (faeces) is then stored in the rectum until you are ready to visit the toilet and have your bowels opened.

Constipation refers to how easily stool passes out of your body and how often. Passing stool is often called a bowel movement. If this does not happen very often or if your bowel movements become less regular than normal and are lumpy, hard or dry and difficult to pass, you may be constipated. Being constipated affects people in different ways. Common symptoms include abdominal pain, bloating, flatulence, nausea, headache, loss of appetite and bad breath.

The first question to ask is whether you are constipated?

Some people believe they are constipated because they do not open their bowels each day. If you are able to pass your motions without having to strain excessively and you have your bowels opened at least three times a week you are probably not constipated.

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Any unexplained change in your normal bowel habit should be reported to your doctor. This includes any bleeding, pain or changes in your motions.

What are the common causes of constipation?

- Not drinking enough fluid
- Not having enough fibre in the diet
- Not eating regularly
- Medication side effects
- Depression
- Pregnancy
- Immobility
- Ignoring the sensation to go to the toilet to have your bowels opened
- Not being able to sit on the toilet due to a disability
- Not having a regular routine
- Anismus (difficulty in relaxing the anal muscles)
- Haemorrhoids (Piles)
- Anal fissures

Constipation may also develop in people who have:

- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Diverticular disease
- Diabetes
- Parkinson's disease
- Multiple sclerosis
- Stroke
- Spinal injury
- Dementia
- An underactive thyroid gland and many other illnesses

Can you pass your bowel movement easily?

Sitting on the toilet in the correct position and using the right muscles are important. Follow the guidance given below. If you have difficulty in sitting comfortably and safely on the toilet because of a disability, tell your doctor or nurse.

Correct Positioning

1. Sit on the toilet so that your knees are higher than your hips. Use something to rest your feet on to make sure you are comfortable in this position.
2. Put your hands on your waist and cough, these are the abdominal muscles that you need to use when straining. Using these muscles, push to bulge out your abdomen.
3. Lean forward and put your elbows on your knees, keeping the pressure on your abdomen.

4. Now tighten your anal muscles (back passage) as though you want to stop passing wind.
5. Keep squeezing until you can feel the muscles lifting upwards.
6. Keeping your abdomen bulged, relax your anal muscles.
7. Check your position. You should be leaning forward, knees higher than your hips, with your elbows on your knees and your abdomen bulging.
8. Now open your mouth slightly and part your teeth. Breathe out and using your abdominal muscles push downwards into your bottom so that you are able to relax.
9. Tighten your anal muscles once more when you have finished opening your bowels.

If you find that your anal muscles are tightening instead of relaxing, practising 4, 5 and 6 will help to get these muscles working correctly. Your motion should be solid, but easy to pass. However, if you are still unable to relax your anal muscles and are straining excessively for long periods you should seek help from your doctor or Continence Nurse Specialist.

Remember...

- Drink 1½ -2 litres of fluid a day
- Eat 5 portions of fruit / vegetables a day
- Eat regularly
- Never ignore the sensation to go to the toilet
- Allow yourself plenty of time and privacy
- Get into a routine
- Exercise (within your capabilities)
- Do not strain. You should be able to empty your bowels with minimal effort
- Sit in the correct position and use the right muscles
- Avoid taking laxatives (unless prescribed)
- Avoid taking over the counter medicines that may make you constipated

Not everyone is the same; a normal bowel habit varies from between three times a day to three times a week. Your motion should be solid, but easy to pass.

Contact us:

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| Wiltshire Continence Service Central Health Clinic Avon Approach Castle Street Salisbury SP1 3SL Telephone: 01722 323196 | Wiltshire Continence Service Trowbridge Community Hospital Adcroft Street Trowbridge BA14 8PH Telephone: 01225 711323 |
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Other useful information: Bladder and Bowel UK – www.bbuk.org.uk

Correct position for opening your bowels

Step one



Knees higher than hips

Step two



Lean forwards and put elbows on your knees

Step three



Bulge out your abdomen
Straighten your spine

Correct position



Knees higher than hips
Lean forwards and put elbows on your knees
Bulge out your abdomen
Straighten your spine

Reproduced by the kind permission of Ray Addison, Nurse Consultant in Bladder and Bowel Dysfunction.
Wendy Ness, Colorectal Nurse Specialist.

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If you or your carer have any concerns regarding a child or adult's safety, please phone Wiltshire Safeguarding Team on 0300 456 0111 (Adult) or 0300 456 0108 (Child) (9am – 5pm Monday - Friday) or please call 999 if you feel they are in immediate danger.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

If you have any questions, or concerns, suggestions or compliments about our service, please speak to a member of staff.

This information sheet is available in other languages and formats. If you would like a copy, please contact us on 0300 123 7797 and whc.pals@nhs.net

Patient and Public Involvement

We value your opinions which will help us to further develop our services.

If you wish to provide feedback or get involved in our patient participation groups, please email the Patient and Public Involvement Officer at

ask.wiltshirehealthandcare@nhs.net or telephone 01249 454386.