



*Southern
Urogynecology*

Center for Incontinence and Female Pelvic Medicine

CONSTIPATION

What is constipation?

Constipation is a problem in the alimentary canal or gastrointestinal tract, the medical term for our bowels. One definition of constipation is having a bowel movement less than three times per week. However constipation is a series of complaints, which is expressed differently depending on the individual. The most common complaints are: difficulty and straining to move your bowels, not going as often as the person likes or changes in the stool, whether too hard, too small or too large.

Constipation may be associated with other problems, including: abdominal pain, low back pain incontinence of the bowels or bladder. Straining with constipation may contribute to pelvic organ prolapse, falling or bulging tissue in the vagina. Constipation is more common in women than men.

Understanding your bowels

The bowel is designed to extract the nourishment and water the body needs from the food you eat. Muscular activity, called peristalsis, is necessary to move food through the system. This movement is often referred to as “gut motility” and can be affected by many things, the amount of food, and the chemical make-up of the food, the effects of hormones and emotions

Food takes 1 to 3 days to travel through the body, but most of the time is spent in the colon. High fat meals take longer than high fiber meals to travel through the colon. Once the nutrients and water have been removed, the waste, known as stool or feces collects in the end portion of the colon and then into the rectum. When stool enters the rectum you will become aware that your bowels need emptying. This urge can be put off until the right place and time, but should not be ignored completely. It is important you empty your bowels very shortly after you feel the first urge.

Emptying your bowels correctly

When you have the urge to move your bowels you go to the toilet and relax the muscles around your rectum, very much like relaxing to urinate. Sometimes straining is needed to complete the passage of stool. You should avoid prolonged and repeated straining. This may cause hemorrhoids or possible pelvic organ prolapsed. Leaning forward and elevating your heels can help pass stool without straining. Childbirth often damages the muscle and nerve supply to the pelvic floor. Supporting the perineum (the area just in front of the anus) during bowel movement can assist in bowel emptying. Covering your hand with toilet paper and placing it over the perineum to provide upward pressure can do this. Kegel exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor if done correctly can maintain strength in this area and prevent complications such as urinary incontinence or constipation. Please ask your health care provider for instructions on how to do Kegel exercises correctly.

What is normal?

For most people normal is between 3 times a day to 3 times per week. The stool color may vary depending on the food you eat. If your stool turns red or black it may suggest bleeding. You should report this to your doctor immediately. Normal stool is well formed and not dry or hard. Stool is made up of about 1/3 bacteria, which is why it is so important to wash your hands after moving your bowels and for women to wipe from front to back avoiding the vagina.

Causes of constipation

Poor fiber intake plays a role; the biggest cause of constipation is failure to relax the muscles around the rectum. Along with a good water and fiber intake, relaxation is one of the most important tools. Stress and changes in your daily lifestyle can cause constipation. Many women report constipation in the last half of their menstrual cycle, due to hormones. To identify the reasons for your constipation you need to examine your daily habits.

Self-help for constipation

Adequate fluid intake and exercise like aerobics or simply just walking are two very important components in helping correct constipation. Emptying your bowels as soon as you feel the urge is also important in maintaining healthy bowel movements. A balanced diet including adequate fiber is also necessary. Beans, peas, prunes, high fiber cereal and bran are examples of just a few high fiber foods. Some people find that caffeine can trigger the urge to empty bowels. This may be helpful in limited amounts.

Laxatives

There are a variety of products that can be taken to stimulate bowel activity. Fiber is a good option because it is not habit forming, be sure to drink plenty of water when taking fiber laxatives. Other laxatives like milk of magnesia draw water into the stool to make it softer. Another category of laxatives contains habit-forming chemicals that stimulate the muscle action of the wall in your bowels. One example of this kind of laxative is Dulcolax→ Stool softeners are available over the counter and can be taken regularly to keep stool soft. There are also products that can be used by direct insertion into the rectum called suppositories. Simple glycerin suppositories provide simple lubrication. Ask your pharmacist or doctor if the laxative you use can be habit forming. Long term use of habit-forming laxatives can actually cause the bowel to stop working over time and ultimately the bowel may stop responding to the chemical laxatives. If you find you are using a habit-forming laxative you can fully control constipation by switching to fiber laxatives which are not habit forming.

Seeking medical help

If the problem cannot be solved by simple means speak to your doctor. After taking a thorough medical history he or she may include some of the following: specialized x-rays, endoscopic examination, and a colon test to see if your colon is slow or there is an obstruction. There are additional tests to investigate muscle tone, sensation and elasticity. Information from these tests will help you and your doctor establish a plan of treatment.

Surgery may be necessary to drain abscesses, control hemorrhoids, or repair tears of the anal lining. The pain from these conditions may prevent normal bowel function. Surgery may also be necessary to repair a rectocele, which is a weakness in the rectal wall causing it to bulge into the vagina. This can cause obstruction and constipation. Most people can be helped by non-surgical means. The most important thing to do to have healthy bowel function is to call your doctor with any concerns or questions.