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Concerned About Constipation?

Constipation can be uncomfortable and worrisome. If you're having fewer bowel movements than usual, taking a long time to pass stools, or the stools are hard, you may be constipated.

Nearly everyone becomes constipated at one time or another, and older people are more likely than younger ones to experience this condition. In fact, about one-third of older adults have occasional symptoms of constipation. The good news is that most of the time constipation is not serious and is treatable.



Symptoms of constipation

Some people worry they are constipated if they don't have a bowel movement every day, but there is no "right" number of daily or weekly bowel movements. Being regular can be different for each person. For some, it can mean twice a day, and for others, three times a week is normal. However, if you often have infrequent bowel movements, you may be constipated.

Symptoms of constipation include:

- Fewer than three bowel movements a week
- Difficult time passing stools
- Lumpy or hard stools
- A feeling of being blocked or of not having fully emptied your bowels.

What causes constipation?

Many medical conditions common for older adults, as well as medications, can cause constipation.

Medical conditions

- Disorders that affect the muscles or nerves used for normal bowel movements — for example, [stroke](#), [Parkinson's disease](#), or a spinal cord injury — can cause constipation.
- Conditions that affect hormones or metabolism, such as [diabetes](#), can also lead to constipation.
- Other medical conditions that can lead to constipation include tumors or other blockages, [pelvic floor disorders](#), and gastrointestinal disorders such as [irritable bowel syndrome](#).
- Changes in diet and exercise due to medical procedures can also lead to constipation.

In addition, people living with diseases that affect their diet and daily habits, such as [Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia](#), may be more likely to experience constipation.

Medicines and dietary supplements

Some [medicines](#) — both prescription and over the counter — can lead to constipation.

- These include some drugs used to treat depression, antacids containing aluminum or calcium, some allergy medicines (antihistamines), certain painkillers, some medicines for [high blood pressure](#), diuretics, anticholinergics, antispasmodics, anticonvulsants, and drugs used to treat [Parkinson's disease](#).
- Certain [dietary supplements](#), such as iron, can also lead to constipation.
- Anesthesia, which is used during medical procedures to keep a person from feeling pain, can also lead to constipation.

Nutrition, activity, and routine

What you eat, drink, and do can also contribute to constipation. For example:

- **Not enough fiber.** You may become constipated if you don't eat enough high-fiber foods, such as [vegetables](#), [fruits](#), and whole [grains](#). Eating a lot of high-fat meats, [dairy products](#) and eggs, sweets, or processed foods may cause constipation.
- **Not enough fluids.** Water and other fluids help fiber work better, so not drinking enough liquids can contribute to harder stools that are more difficult to pass.
- **Lack of physical activity.** Not getting enough exercise or long periods of inactivity due to illness or following surgery may cause constipation.
- **Changes in routine.** Altering your daily routine — traveling, for example — can cause constipation.

Treatment for constipation

Many cases of constipation can be treated at home. Try these changes to help make your stools softer and easier to pass and to prevent constipation in the future.

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Your diet should contain ample natural fiber from sources like fresh fruits and vegetables, either cooked or raw, along with whole-grain cereals and breads. Learn more about how much fiber you need each day, why fiber is important, and examples of high-fiber foods on the [Nutrition.gov Fiber page](#).
- **Be sure to get enough fluids.** With too little fluid, constipation can get worse. Drinking enough water, juice, and other fluids can help you have regular bowel movements. Learn more about [what to eat and drink if you're constipated](#).
- **Stay active.** Do things that keep you [moving and active](#). For example, go for walks. Participate in physical activity that you [enjoy](#) and make it a part of your everyday life.

There are also several over-the-counter laxatives, including fiber supplements and stool softeners, that may help with constipation. Your doctor or other health care provider can help you decide which laxatives may be best for you.

If these changes don't work or you are experiencing pain, bleeding, or other serious symptoms, talk with your doctor about other treatments. Your doctor may suggest changes to your diet or activity; prescribe a supplement or medication for constipation; or recommend biofeedback training, which helps people learn to control their muscles through the use of electronic devices and a coach. In some rare cases, surgery may be recommended, for example, to treat a blockage or remove part of the colon if those muscles don't work. Talk with your doctor about the risks and benefits of surgery and other treatments.

You may also be interested in

- Finding out more about [dietary supplements](#)
- Learning more about [quantity and quality of food](#)
- Viewing this infographic about [ways to boost your health](#)

When should you see a doctor?

Sometimes constipation can be a symptom of more severe illness, including colorectal and other types of cancer. See your doctor or other health care provider if your bowel habits change and are accompanied by any one of the following:

- There is blood in your stool or you are bleeding from your rectum
- You are having serious stomach pains or are unable to pass gas
- You are vomiting or have a fever
- You lose weight without trying
- You are experiencing lower back pain
- Fiber and exercise haven't helped

Visit the NIH National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) [educational page](#) on constipation for more information on possible causes and treatments.

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For more information about constipation

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