



# Constipation



Constipation is having trouble passing stool or having hard stools. “Regularity” does not mean that you have a bowel movement every day. Normal bowel habits range from 3 movements a day to 3 each week. What is more important is what is normal for you.

## SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- A hard time passing stool.  
Not being able to pass stool.  
Having very hard stool.
- Straining to have a bowel movement
- Abdominal swelling. The feeling of continued fullness after passing stool.

## CAUSES

- Drinking too few fluids. Not eating enough dietary fiber.
- Not being active enough
- Not going to the bathroom when you have the urge to pass stool
- Misuse of laxatives
- A side effect of some heart, pain, and antidepressant medicines, as well as, antacids, antihistamines, and water pills
- Chronic illnesses that slow the digestive tract. Examples are diabetes and an underactive thyroid.
- Cancer or other diseases of the bowel, such as irritable bowel syndrome

## TREATMENT

Self-care usually treats constipation. You may also need to talk to your doctor about health problems and medicines that could cause the problem.

## TRIAGE QUESTIONS

With constipation, do you have any of these problems?

- Abdominal pain, especially on the lower left side, that occurs often
- Very narrow stools. Blood in the stool or from the rectum.
- Recent change in bowel movement pattern
- Nausea or vomiting

NO

YES

SEE DOCTOR



Did constipation occur after taking prescribed or over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, herbal products, etc.? Or, does it worsen or not improve after 1 week of self-care?

NO

YES

CALL DOCTOR



USE SELF-CARE



## SELF-CARE

- Eat foods high in dietary fiber. Examples are bran, whole-grain breads and cereals, beans, lentils, and fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Drink at least 1-1/2 to 2 quarts fluids every day. Have hot water, tea, etc. to stimulate the bowel.
- Don't resist the urge to pass stool.
- Get enough exercise.
- If you take antacids or iron supplements and get constipated easily, discuss the use of these with your doctor.
- Take stool softeners (e.g., Colace), fiber supplements (e.g., Metamucil), “stimulant” laxatives (e.g., Ex-Lax), or enemas, as directed on the label and by your doctor.