Tips for Relieving Constipation

What is Constipation?
Constipation when you have painful or difficult bowel movements. The time between these movements does not matter, as it can be different for all people. The stool you are trying to pass may be small, hard and dry. You may feel bloated and it may hurt when passing the stool. This can occur when your colon absorbs too much fluid as the stool is passing through or if the stool is passing through too slowly.

What can cause it?
There are many reasons and below is a list of common reasons.

- Not drinking enough fluids.
- A diet low in fiber.
- Eating in a hurry or not on a regular basis.
- Not being physically active.
- Travel.
- Pregnancy.
- Pain pills or other medicines.
- Not using the bathroom when you feel the urge.
- Abuse of laxatives.
- Disease or problems with the colon or rectum.
- Stroke or paralysis.

Do you drink plenty of fluids?
Drink 8 to 10 glasses of fluids a day (water, juice, tea, etc.). Warm liquids like coffee, tea, or hot water with lemon may help bring about a bowel movement.

Do you eat foods high in fiber?
Fibers are found in the walls of plants that are not fully digested by the body. There are two main types of fiber, soluble and insoluble. Soluble fiber attracts water and turns into a gel during digestion. This slows digestion, but also creates a softer stool that may be easier to pass. Soluble fiber is found in oat bran, barley, nuts, seeds, beans, lentils, peas, apples, pears, and some other fruits and vegetables.

Insoluble fiber, often called “roughage,” is found in foods such as wheat bran, vegetables, and whole grains. It may help speed the passage of foods through the stomach and intestines and adds bulk to the stool. Both types of fiber along with enough fluids are helpful to prevent and relieve constipation. Foods often contain a combination of both soluble and insoluble fiber.
How Much Fiber Do I Need?

- Women should aim for 21-25 grams of total fiber each day while men need 30-38 grams per day though it depends on age. There are no guidelines for how much soluble versus insoluble fiber to include.
- Guidelines for Increasing Fiber Intake:
  - Each day, include in your diet at least five servings of fruits and vegetables and two servings of whole grain breads, cereals, dried beans, peas or lentils.
  - Slowly increase your dietary fiber to avoid bloating or gas.
  - Make sure to also increase your fluid intake to 8-10 glasses daily as you increase your fiber intake.

How can high fiber foods be added to my diet?

- Include fruits, vegetables, legumes, and high fiber grains, like brown or wild rice, quinoa, whole grain breads, cereals, popcorn, and bran. Cooking fruits, vegetables, grains or dry beans does not decrease fiber, but peeling or juicing fruits or vegetables does decrease the fiber.
- Add a small amount of 100% bran cereal, ground flax seed or wheat germ (1 to 3 tablespoons a day) into cooked cereal, casseroles, cookie dough, pancake batter, and other baked goods.
- Add raw vegetables or fruits into salads, or eat as a snack.
- Use wheat germ or bran as a topping on ice cream, yogurt, pudding or applesauce.
- Add nuts and dried fruits to baked goods or cereals.
- Prunes and prune juice may be used for their laxative effect.
- Read nutrition labels to find out how much fiber per serving is in the foods you eat. Choose cereal and bread products with at least 5 grams of fiber per serving or more, when you can.

Do you eat in a hurry and not at regular times?
If you do, don’t! Space your meals throughout the day. Allow yourself enough time to eat. You’ll be more likely to include the amount of fiber and liquids that you need.

Are you getting enough exercise?
Exercising each day or at least every other day may help get the bowel moving. Check with your doctor or nurse about what exercise is best for you.

Do you always allow enough time to have a bowel movement?
Making sure you have enough time is important. Your bowels will be more active after eating a meal. You may find that this is a time when you might feel the need to use the bathroom. This is especially true after the first meal of the day. Don’t ignore the urge to have a bowel movement. If you continue to ignore the urge, it may not return for quite some time.

When should I call the doctor?
- If constipation does not go away
- Very thin, pencil-like stools
- Abdominal pain and swelling
- Weight loss; lack of energy or appetite
- Rectal bleeding
- Before using any laxative or enemas
High Fiber Foods

Breads
- Whole grain breads, buns, rolls or crackers (dark rye, pumpernickel, oatmeal, whole wheat)
- Nut breads
- Bran muffins
- Breads or cereals with seeds
- Whole wheat flour pancakes and cookies

Cereals
- Bran cereals (100% bran, 40% bran flakes)
- Oat bran (hot or cold)
- Granola
- Maltex®
- oatmeal
- Shredded wheat
- Cereals with nuts, raisins, seeds
- Wheatena®
- Ralston®
- Ezekiel®

Whole grains and Flours
- Wheat germ
- Buckwheat
- Cornmeal
- Wheat bran
- High fiber granola bars (Fiber One®, Kashi®)
- Popcorn
- Brown rice
- Millet
- Whole wheat
- Bulgur
- Barley
- Quinoa
- Wild rice
- farro

Fruits
- Fresh fruits, those with edible skins (apples, pears) or seeds (berries) are best
- Dried fruits

Vegetables
- Raw or cooked vegetables

Legumes
- Dried beans or peas in the form of bean soup, baked beans, pea soup, kidney beans, lentils, garbanzo beans, black beans
- Peanuts
- Peanut butter
- Pasta made from legumes such as edamame, garbanzo beans, or black beans
- Tempeh
Teach Back:

What is the most important thing you learned from this handout?

What changes will you make in your diet/lifestyle, based on what you learned today?

If you are a UW Health patient and have more questions please contact UW Health at one of the phone numbers listed below. You can also visit our website at [www.uwhealth.org/nutrition](http://www.uwhealth.org/nutrition).

Nutrition clinics for UW Hospital and Clinics (UWHC) and American Family Children’s Hospital (AFCH) can be reached at: **(608) 890-5500**.

Nutrition clinics for UW Medical Foundation (UWMF) can be reached at: **(608) 287-2770**.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 3/2016 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Clinical Nutrition Services Department and the Department of Nursing. HF#242