

Constipation

Constipation is a condition characterised by a change in usual bowel movements and dry, solid stools. It occurs most often due to changes in diet or routine, or due to inadequate fibre intake.

Causes

- Unbalanced diet (insufficient fibre)
- Change in diet or daily routine
- Pregnancy
- The taking of medicines such as opiates and anticholinergics
- Hypothyroidism
- Lower-bowel abnormalities
- Chronic use of laxatives or administering of enemas
- Lack of exercise
- Insufficient fluid intake
- Regularly ignoring the urge
- Stress, anxiety or depression

Symptoms

- Difficulty in passing stools
- Straining when passing stools
- Less than usual passing of stools
- Lumpy, dry or very solid stools
- Pain and cramping in the abdomen
- Feeling bloated

Prevention

- Regular exercise
- Increased intake of fibre-rich food, eg vegetables, fruit, bran and cooked dried prunes
- Adequate hydration
- Regular bowel habits
- Avoid continuous use of laxatives

Medication suitable for treatment

The following medicines for the relief of constipation are available over the counter:

- Sennosides A and B (1 tablet at night)
- Lactulose (10–20 ml once or twice daily)

When to see a doctor

- Poor response to treatment
- Presence of blood in stools or bleeding from the rectum
- Severe discomfort or worsening symptoms
- Difficulty passing gas

Self-help questions

Questions	YES	NO
1 Do you experience difficulty when passing stools?		
2. Have you noticed blood in your stools or bleeding from your rectum?		
3. Do you have difficulty passing gas?		
4. Do you pass hard stools every time you go to the toilet?		
5. Do you feel bloated?		
6. Do you have to push hard when passing stools?		

❖ **If you answered YES to one or two questions above, you are suffering from constipation. Please seek medical help.**

Reference

Standard Treatment Guidelines and Essential Medicine List for South Africa. 2018. Primary Healthcare level.

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