

## Patient information - Constipation

### Preventing constipation

Constipation is a common problem. It means either going to the toilet to empty the bowels less often than usual, or passing hard or painful stools.

Constipation may be caused by not eating enough fibre or not drinking enough fluids. It can also be a side-effect of some medicines or related to a medical condition. In many cases, the cause is not clear. Many people only experience constipation for a short period of time with no lasting effects on their health.

**Although constipation is common, you can take several steps to prevent it, including making diet and lifestyle changes.**

### Fibre

Most adults do not eat enough fibre.

Make sure you have enough fibre in your diet. Eating more fibre will keep your bowel movements regular because it helps food pass through your digestive system more easily. Foods high in fibre also make you feel fuller for longer. Make sure you drink plenty of fluids to help your body to process the fibre. Although the effects of a high fibre diet may be seen in a few days, it may take as long as four weeks.

If you are increasing your fibre intake, **it is important to increase it gradually**. A sudden increase may make you feel bloated. You may also produce more flatulence (wind) and have stomach cramps.

You should have approximately 18g of fibre a day. Constipation can be eased and prevented by eating more fibre such as:

- Wholemeal or wholewheat bread
- Brown rice
- Wholemeal pasta
- Wholegrain breakfast cereals
- Eating five portions of fruit and vegetables each day.

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You might like to include fruit that contain sorbitol (a naturally occurring sugar that has an effect of softening your poo) such as apples, apricots, gooseberries, grapes (and raisins), peaches, pears, plums, prunes, raspberries and strawberries. As a guide, a slice of wholemeal bread, an apple with the skin on or a banana contain about 2g of fibre each.

The table at the end of the leaflet provides a list of the amount of fibre in different foods.

### **Fluids**

Make sure that you drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration and steadily increase your intake when you are exercising or when it is hot. You should also drink plenty of water, about 8-10 cups each day. As a start try drinking a glass of water 3-4 times a day in addition to what you normally drink.

Try to cut back on the amount of caffeine, alcohol and fizzy drinks that you consume.

### **Toilet habits**

Never ignore the urge to go to the toilet. Ignoring the urge can significantly increase your chances of having constipation. The best time for you to pass stools is first thing in the morning, or about 30 minutes after a meal.

When you use the toilet, make sure you have enough time and privacy to pass stools comfortably.

### **Exercise**

Keeping mobile and active will greatly reduce your risk of getting constipation. Ideally, do at least 150 minutes of physical activity every week.

Not only will regular exercise reduce your risk of becoming constipated, but it will also leave you feeling healthier and improve your mood, energy levels and general fitness.

### **When should I seek medical help?**

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- If you have been constipated or have a feeling of not being able to empty your bowel completely that doesn't go away within six weeks
- Your tummy becomes increasingly swollen and/ or you start vomiting which could suggest that your bowels are blocked
- You are over 50 years old and haven't suffered from constipation before
- You think that it is your medication which is making you constipated
- You notice blood in your stools, particularly if you don't have any pain or discomfort around the opening of your back passage
- You have been losing weight for no apparent reason, you feel tired all the time or 'not quite right', sweaty or feverish or you find that these symptoms don't go away within four to six weeks

Laxatives can also be used to treat constipation but these should only be needed if the dietary and exercise measures above do not work. There are several types of laxatives which work in different ways and the time they take to work can vary.

Laxatives can be bought from your pharmacy, supermarket or store but you should visit your GP if your symptoms persist. More information on constipation can be found by visiting [www.nhs.uk/conditions/constipation](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/constipation)

**Table 1 . Approximate amount of fibre in examples of commonly consumed foods and fibre supplements (Taken from NICE clinical knowledge summaries. Constipation. February 2015)**

Food		Typical portion (weight)	Fibre content grams (g) per portion
Fibre supplements	Bran (wheat)	1 tablespoon (7g)	2.5g
	All-Bran	1 medium sized bowl (40g)	9.8g
Breakfast cereals	Shredded wheat	2 pieces (44g)	4.3g
	Bran flakes	1 medium sized	3.9g

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Food		Typical portion (weight)	Fibre content grams (g) per portion
		bowl (30g)	
	Weetabix	2 pieces (37.5g)	3.6g
	Muesli (no added sugar)	1 medium sized bowl (45g)	3.4g
	Muesli (Swiss style)	1 medium sized bowl (45g)	2.9g
	Fruit 'n' Fibre	1 medium sized bowl (40g)	2.8g
	Porridge (milk or water)	1 medium sized bowl (250g)	2.3g
	Cornflakes	1 medium sized bowl (30g)	0.3g
<b>Bread/rice/pasta</b>	Crispbread, rye	4 crispbreads (36g)	4.2g
	Pitta bread (wholemeal)	1 piece (75g)	3.9g
	Pasta (plain, fresh cooked)	1 medium portion (200 g)	3.8g
<b>Bread/rice/pasta</b>	Wholemeal bread	2 slices (70g)	3.5g
	Naan bread	1 piece (160g)	3.2g
	Brown bread	2 slices (70g)	2.5g
	Granary bread	2 slices (70 g)	2.3g
	Brown rice (boiled)	1 medium portion (200 g)	1.6g
	White bread	2 slices (70g)	1.3g
	White rice (boiled)	1 medium portion	0.2g

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Food		Typical portion (weight)	Fibre content grams (g) per portion
		(200g)	
<b>Vegetables</b>	Baked beans (in tomato sauce)	Half can (200g)	7.4g
	Red kidney beans (boiled)	3 tablespoons (80g)	5.4g
	Peas (boiled)	3 heaped tablespoons (80g)	3.6g
	French beans (boiled)	4 heaped tablespoons (80g)	3.3g
	Brussel sprouts (boiled)	8 sprouts (80g)	2.5g
	Potatoes (old, boiled)	1 medium size (200g)	2.4g
	Spring greens (boiled)	4 heaped tablespoons (80g)	2.1g
<b>Vegetables</b>	Carrots (boiled, sliced)	3 heaped tablespoons (80g)	2.0g
	Broccoli (boiled)	2 spears (80g)	1.8g
	Spinach (boiled)	2 heaped tablespoons (80g)	1.7g
<b>Salad vegetables</b>	Pepper (capsicum green/red)	Half (80g)	1.3g
	Onions (raw)	1 medium (80g)	1.1g
	Olives (in brine)	1 heaped tablespoon (30g)	0.9 g
	Tomato (raw)	1 medium/7 cherry	0.8 g

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Food		Typical portion (weight)	Fibre content grams (g) per portion
		(80g)	
	Lettuce (sliced)	1 bowl (80g)	0.7 g
Fruit	Avocado pear	1 medium (145g)	4.9 g
	Pear (with skin)	1 medium (170g)	3.7 g
	Orange	1 medium (160g)	2.7 g
	Apple (with skin)	1 medium (112g)	2.0 g
	Raspberries	2 handfuls (80g)	2.0 g
Fruit	Banana	1 medium (150g)	1.7g
	Tomato juice	1 small glass (200mL)	1.2g
	Strawberries	7 strawberries (80g)	0.9g
	Grapes	1 handful (80g)	0.6g
	Orange juice	1 small glass (200mL)	0.2g
Dried fruit/nuts	Apricots (semi-dried)	3 whole (80g)	5.0g
	Prunes (semi-dried)	3 whole (80g)	4.6g
	Almonds	20 nuts (33g)	2.4g
	Peanuts (plain)	1 tablespoon (25g)	1.6g
	Mixed nuts	1 tablespoon (25g)	1.5g
	Brazil nuts	10 nuts (33g)	1.4g

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Food		Typical portion (weight)	Fibre content grams (g) per portion
	Raisins/sultanas	1 tablespoon (25g)	0.5g
Convenience foods	Quorn (pieces)	1 serving (100g)	4.8g
	Chicken curry (takeaway)	1 portion meat/sauce (150g)	3.0g
Convenience foods	Vegetable pasty	1 medium sized (150 g)	3.0 g
	Potato crisps (low-fat)	1 bag (35 g)	2.1 g
	Pakora/bhajia (vegetable)	1 portion (50 g)	1.8 g
	Pizza (cheese and tomato)	1 slice, deep pan (80 g)	1.8 g