

Constipation in adults

SELF CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 5

This information helps you to know what's normal and what you can expect to happen if your poo is too hard and/or difficult to pass (known as constipation). It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

What is constipation?

Constipation is when your poo (or "stools") become hard and it is more difficult than usual, or even painful, to pass when going to the toilet. You may also have a feeling of being unable to completely empty your bowels. Opening your bowels may be more difficult because your poo is hard, lumpy, and dry, or abnormally small or large.

Other symptoms

Constipation may be accompanied by feeling bloated or sick, loss of appetite, aches or cramps in your tummy, or pooing less than 3 times a week.

How common is it?

Constipation is common (particularly in women and older people). It is estimated 1 in every 7 adults has constipation at any one time.

Common causes

Not eating enough fibre (which can be found in cereals, vegetables and fruit), changing your eating habits, ignoring the urge to go to the toilet, not drinking enough fluids, changing your daily routine, not getting enough exercise and mental health problems such as depression, stress or anxiety are common causes for constipation. Certain medications, such as opiates (including codeine), diuretics and antidepressants may also cause constipation.

What can I expect to happen?

Normal poo frequency

We are all different when it comes to bowel habits. Some people poo only every 3-4 days, whereas others may go more than once a day.

Constipation is usually harmless

Being constipated occasionally is common and usually completely harmless.

Duration

In most cases, constipation is short-lived and settles within a few days – or 2 to 4 weeks at the most.

Investigations

There is usually no need for any investigations or procedures because the diagnosis can often be made based on the symptoms alone.

Treatment for constipation

Pain relief:

Simple pain killers such as paracetamol can help to relieve pain such as tummy cramps associated with constipation.

Medicines to ease constipation:

Many preparations are available over the counter to help you open your bowels.

Speak to a member of your pharmacy team for advice.

What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

Healthy diet

Increasing your daily fibre intake by eating a higher proportion of fruit, vegetables, seeds, pulses and cereals, or by taking soluble fibre in the form of oats, wheat bran or linseed, can help to alleviate symptoms and prevent symptoms from recurring. These food stuffs make your poo softer and bulkier, and therefore easier to pass.

Hydration

Drinking plenty of fluids helps prevent constipation.

Exercise

Exercising more can help your bowels digest food.

Listen to your body

Respond to your bowel's natural pattern and do not delay going to the toilet when you feel the urge to go. Keep to a regular time and place and give yourself plenty of time to use the toilet.

When to seek help

In rare cases, more serious underlying causes can make you constipated.

See your GP if you notice any of the following:

Duration: You have been constipated or have a persistent feeling of not being able to empty your bowel completely that does not go away within 6 weeks.

Other symptoms: Your tummy becomes increasingly swollen, and, or, you start vomiting, which could suggest that your bowels are blocked.

Age: You are over 50 and have never suffered from constipation before.

Medication: You think that a medication makes you constipated.

Blood in your stools: You notice blood in your poo, particularly if you do not have any pain or discomfort around the opening of your back passage.

General symptoms: You have been losing weight for no apparent reason; you also feel tired all the time, 'not quite right', sweaty or feverish; or you find that these symptoms don't go away within 4 to 6 weeks.

Where to find out more

A member of your pharmacy team can help with assessing and managing your symptoms.

Or, for more information visit the NHS website in your country or other reputable websites, links are below:

- [NHS Inform, Scotland](#)
- [NHS England](#)
- [NHS NI Direct, Northern Ireland](#)
- [NHS111, Wales](#)
- [Bowel Cancer UK](#)