

First line dietary advice for constipation

North Devon District Hospital

Dietetic Service

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language please contact the PALS desk on 01271 314090 or at rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net.

What is constipation?

Constipation is a common digestive condition. It can mean that you are not passing stools regularly or you are unable to completely empty your bowel. Constipation can also occur when you are finding it difficult to pass a stool because the stools are hard and dry. This can cause you to strain.

Constipation can lead to other symptoms including abdominal bloating or discomfort, stomach pains or cramps, excess wind and lethargy.

What are the causes of constipation?

There are many causes of constipation, however the two dietary factors most associated with this condition are:

1. Not having enough fibre in the diet
2. Not having enough fluid

Therefore, dietary changes which focus on increasing fibre and fluid intake can be beneficial in the management of constipation. Today's lifestyle and eating habits such as rising late in the morning (or shift work) and rushing to school/work can be attributing factors.

Food leaves the stomach and enters the small intestines in a liquid form. From here, the nutrients are extracted and absorbed. The remaining liquid matter, which is mainly waste products, then leaves the small intestines and enters the colon (also known as the large intestine). The colon is 5-6ft long and its primary function is to withdraw the water from the liquid stool, so that by the time it reaches the rectum there is a soft-formed stool. When food passes through the colon too quickly, not enough water is absorbed and diarrhoea may result. By contrast, if waste material is passed too slowly, too much water is absorbed leading to constipation. A sluggish or poorly contracting bowel can be caused from many conditions such as:

- pregnancy
- anal fissures and haemorrhoids
- certain drugs
- travel
- stress
- mechanical bowel obstructions such as tumours, advanced diverticulosis¹ or narrowing of the colon

Dietary advice for the management of constipation

1. Gradually increase your intake of fibre

Fibre is the edible parts of plants, which pass through your bowels undigested and therefore it provides the bulk to your stools. Try to gradually increase your intake of high fibre foods. It is important to do this gradually as a sudden increase can make symptoms worse.

¹ Diverticulosis is the condition of having multiple pouches or pockets (diverticula) in the colon.

Regular eating throughout the day is also important to promote a regular bowel habit.

Rich sources of fibre include:

- Fruit and vegetables
- Bean and pulses Beans, peas, lentils
- Oat based products
- Wholegrain cereals



Suggestions:

Try gradually introducing brown or golden linseeds/flaxseed (whole or ground) into your diet. Start with ½ teaspoon a day and gradually build up to 1-2 tablespoon a day. These seeds can be purchased in supermarkets and most health-food shops. They can be sprinkled on cereals, yogurts, soups, stews or salads.

It is **vital** that you increase your fluid intake if you are using this approach. The additional fibre provides your stool with extra bulk, but to make this stool easy to pass, you need to ensure it is soft and slippery. This can be achieved by drinking enough fluid. **Therefore, ensure that you have a 200ml glass of fluid with each spoonful of linseeds taken.**

2. Gradually increase your intake of fluid – aiming for at least 2 L (8 glasses) of fluid a day

Drinks can include water, milk, squash, herbal teas and other non-caffeinated drinks.

Are you drinking enough??

Think...

1,2,3 – healthy wee

Over 4 – drink more



The above image has been kindly provided from NHS inform regarding hydration awareness www.nhsinform.scot/campaigns/hydration

Other advice:

- Identify a bowel routine – find a time of day and a place where you are comfortable to spend time on the toilet in the correct positioning.
- Respond to your bowel's natural pattern and listen to your body.
- When you feel the urge, respond by trying to open your bowel.
- Delaying can make the constipation worse.
- A warm drink with breakfast can often help
- Keep active and as mobile as possible by including regular activity. An easy one to remember is 'Motion is Lotion'.

Laxatives

Discuss laxatives with your GP but ensure that you **do not use lactulose** as this can make IBS symptoms worse due to its ability to ferment and create gas in the gut.

The images across have been kindly provided by the Liverpool Women's NHS Foundation Trust www.liverpoolwomens.nhs.uk/patients/patient-information-leaflets



Further information

NHS Constipation
www.nhs.uk/conditions/constipation

GUTS UK!
<https://gutscharity.org.uk/advice-and-information/symptoms/constipation>

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

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Tell us about your experience of our services. Share your feedback on the Care Opinion website www.careopinion.org.uk.

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