

# Diet and your colostomy

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## What is a colostomy?

A colostomy is made by bringing part of your large bowel (colon) to the surface of your skin to form an opening. This opening is called a stoma. A colostomy is normally on the left side of your abdomen.

## What happens during healthy digestion?

During healthy digestion, food is mixed with digestive juices and broken down as it moves through the digestive system. The digestive system includes the mouth, the oesophagus (gullet), stomach, small bowel (ileum), large bowel (colon), rectum and anus.

Digestion begins with chewing and swallowing food. It passes into the stomach where it is mixed with digestive acids that break down the food. The stomach contents then travel into the small bowel where nutrients are absorbed. Waste products are pushed into the large bowel (colon), water is removed to form a stool which leaves the body via the rectum then anus.

Now that you have a colostomy, your stools (faeces) are passed out through your colon, instead of the rectum.

## Why am I producing so much fluid through my stoma?

The large bowel removes excess water from waste products during digestion. The more of your large bowel you have removed, the softer and more fluid your stoma output will be.

## How should my stoma output look?

It takes time for your stoma to function and there may be a lot of fluid in your output at first. Gradually your bowel should adapt and your fluid loss should reduce. The output from your stoma should be soft to firm stools. Your output is unique to you. Please monitor this closely so you are aware what is 'normal' for you.

## Healthy eating with a colostomy

Healthy eating is important for us all and you should continue to follow a balanced diet for good health. Having a colostomy does not mean that you will have to change what you eat. It is not necessary to follow a special diet unless you have been advised to do so by your surgical team, dietitian or due to another medical condition. Everyone's tolerance to different foods varies, so monitor your reactions to foods to understand your tolerance.

### After the operation:

In the majority of cases, people are allowed to return to their usual eating and drinking habits fairly quickly after surgery. This will be guided by the surgical team. We have a build-up scale that will be discussed with you. Once you are able to introduce solid food, it will help the gut to start working, to allow the stool to thicken and establish a normal stoma output.

After your discharge from hospital, you should feel confident to progress toward your usual diet. Follow the advice below to help you enjoy the foods you eat.

- Eat at regular times and avoid long gaps between meals
- Enjoy your meals in a relaxed atmosphere
- Sit down, preferably at a table
- To prevent wind (flatulence), do not drink and eat at the same time
- If you wear dentures, make sure they fit properly
- Chew food thoroughly to help digestion and to prevent wind
- Once your colostomy has established your 'normal' output, follow a high fibre diet

If you have questions about how to get the right balance with your diet, ask your dietitian or look up the Eatwell Plate on the NHS website. It is important to incorporate daily carbohydrates, fruit and vegetables, protein foods such as meat, fish, eggs and beans and milk or alternatives dairy options.

Surgery puts a lot of strain on your body. Leading up to this you may have had a reduced appetite and/or lost weight. Therefore, it is important to eat well after your surgery.

- Eat small meals frequently
- Include foods high in protein such as meat, fish, chicken and dairy foods
- Have five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- Drink plenty of fluid, six to eight cups or glasses (1.5-2L) every day

## Are there any foods I should avoid?

We are all different – some people with a stoma can struggle with certain foods whilst others can eat anything at all. Dietary advice is very personal so do not restrict food items from your diet unless you have been advised to do so. If you are unsure, try following a little and often approach to increase your confidence with food and your new stoma. Keeping a food and symptoms diary can help.

## Dealing with common stoma issues

### Some food may cause wind (flatulence)

Some foods may cause wind through your stoma. These may be similar to the foods that caused wind before you had your colostomy. Avoid these foods for the first one to two weeks following your surgery, then only include them in small quantities, or avoid them completely if they continue to cause problems.

- Pulses such as lentils, peas and beans
- Brussels sprouts and cabbage
- Chewing gum
- Beer and fizzy drinks (stir these drinks then allow them to stand for about 10 minutes to reduce the fizz before drinking)

### Odours/smells

If your stoma bag is correctly applied, you should not experience any smells. However, some foods may increase the smell from your output – if they affect you, just avoid them. Higher-risk foods include:

- Onions (particularly raw)
- Garlic
- Cauliflower, cabbage and sprouts
- Spicy foods
- Eggs

A few drops of vanilla essence, deodorant powders or sprays in your stoma bag may help with odour. Discuss this with your stoma nurses who can recommend where you can buy these.

### Constipation

Constipation can affect all of us. A colostomy may not work every day, but should produce an output most days. If you have had no output from your colostomy for 3 days and/or you feel unwell, contact your GP or stoma care nurse.

Tips if you have constipation:

- Drink more fluids, such as water, tea, diluting juice, fruit juices
- Include more wholemeal bread/cereals, fruit and vegetables to increase your fibre intake
- If you are able, be more active, for example walk more and take the stairs rather than the escalator or lift

## Diarrhoea

If your stoma is producing loose output, your body will be losing more water and salt. This increases your risk of dehydration. If this happens, it is important to drink plenty of fluids such as water, tea and still (non-fizzy) isotonic sports drinks. Adding salt to your meals will also help replace any lost salts.

To avoid diarrhoea:

- Have no more than five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- Have no more than 150ml of fruit juice in a day
- Limit your alcohol intake (as a guide to 1-2 units per day)
- Limit your caffeine intake – have no more than three to four cups tea/coffee per day
- Limit your intake of sweeteners such as those found in diet fizzy drinks, no added sugar squash and sugar free sweets/chewing gum (e.g. acesulfame K, aspartame, saccharin, sorbitol, sucralose, stevia and xylitol)
- Reduce high fibre foods such as whole grain cereals or bread

If you feel the increase in your output is due to a change in your food/fluids or daily routine, including the following foods may help:

- Under-ripe bananas
- White rice, pasta, noodles and bread
- Low fibre breakfast cereal such as cornflakes or Rice Krispies
- Porridge
- Foods that contain gelatin, for example marshmallows or jelly babies

If you think the high output is a result of an illness, stomach upset or food poisoning, or if it continues for more than 24 hours, contact your GP, stoma care nurse or local chemotherapy unit, if applicable.

## Colostomy and blockages

While it is very rare, your colostomy may become blocked. The best way to avoid blockages is to chew your food well. Take time to eat your food slowly and drink plenty of fluid after you have eaten. Keeping a diary of the food you eat and any symptoms you experience can help you to identify any foods that cause you problems so you can avoid them if/as needed.

The list below contains foods that more commonly cause blockages.

- Sweetcorn and peas
- Orange/grapefruit pith
- Dried fruit
- Celery
- Salad vegetables
- Pineapple
- Mushrooms
- Raw or desiccated coconut (coconut milk is ok)
- Tomato skins and pips
- Nuts and seeds

## **Poor appetite**

If you have lost weight or are struggling with eating after your operation, a few simple changes to your meals and snacks can make a difference.

- Eat small, frequent meals with snacks in between
- Take drinks after your meals, not before to avoid feeling full
- Use full fat milk. Try to use a pint of full fat milk every day in cereals, drinks and puddings. You can make this more nourishing by mixing one pint with two to four tablespoons of dried skimmed milk powder
- Try full fat, whole milk or thick creamy yoghurts. Avoid diet/low fat varieties
- Add margarine or butter to mashed potatoes, and generously spread it on bread/crackers/scones/pancakes
- Mix grated cheese or cream into soups, scrambled eggs and sauces
- Use mayonnaise, salad cream and dressings generously

Contact your stoma nurse, district nurse, practice nurse, GP or dietitian if you continue to have problems with eating.

## Suggested meal plan after colostomy

This plan includes selected examples and is **to be used as a guide only**.

### Breakfast

- 150ml of fruit juice or a piece of fruit
- Breakfast cereal with milk
- Bread/toast (white or wholemeal bread)

### Lunch

- Sandwich/bread roll with cold meat/cheese/eggs/tuna
- Baked potato with tuna and/or cheese
- Omelette and bread
- Scrambled/poached egg on toast
- Spaghetti on toast

### Evening meal

- Meat, chicken or fish – these could be in any form including cold sliced meats, casseroles, stews or cooked in a sauce, minced or convenience foods such as sausages, burgers, fishcakes or fish fingers
- Vegetarian dishes made with eggs or cheese – an omelette, scrambled, poached or boiled, macaroni cheese, grated cheese with a baked potato

Always include vegetables such as carrots, turnip, peppers, parsnips, butternut squash or salad (to ensure you are reaching your 5-a-day allowance). Include some starchy foods such as potatoes (boiled, mashed, baked, roast, chips, croquettes), boiled rice or pasta.

### Puddings

- Milk pudding such as rice pudding, semolina or custard
- Ice-cream or yoghurts
- Mousse, canned fruit, jelly
- Plain sponge, apple crumble, apple pie with custard or cream

### Snacks

- Crackers and cheese
- Crisps, scones, biscuits, pancakes or yogurts
- Milky drinks, for example Horlicks or hot chocolate
- Sponge cake

## Further information

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact the dietetic team.

Nutrition and Dietetic Department  
North Devon District Hospital  
Barnstable  
Telephone: 01271 322306 (Monday – Friday, 8am – 4pm)  
Email: [rduh.dietetics-northern@nhs.net](mailto:rduh.dietetics-northern@nhs.net)

If you have any stoma specific queries, please contact your stoma nurse.

For further information, Colostomy UK can be a very useful place to start.  
Write to: Colostomy UK Enterprise House 95 London Street Reading Berkshire RG1 4QA  
Admin support: 0118 939 1537  
Stoma helpline: 0800 328 4257  
Website: [www.colostomyUK.org](http://www.colostomyUK.org)

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## 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](mailto:rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net). You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

## Have your say

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Tell us about your experience of our services. Share your feedback on the Care Opinion website [www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk).

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Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust  
Raleigh Park, Barnstaple  
Devon EX31 4JB  
Tel. 01271 322577  
[www.royaldevon.nhs.uk](http://www.royaldevon.nhs.uk)

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