

Managing Constipation

Introduction

The two most important issues in managing constipation are to understand normal bowel function and to eat a healthy and balanced diet. Important dietary considerations are taking adequate fluids and eating foods rich in fibre. There are two types of fibre which are important to include in the diet: Insoluble fibre and soluble fibre. The former mainly derive from the wheat, barley and rye and the latter mainly from oats, fruits and many vegetables. Laxatives and enemas may be considered if dietary management fails.

Bowel Function and Behaviour

The bowels are most active following meals, and this is often the time when stools will pass most readily. When a person ignores his or her body's signals to pass stool, the signals become weaker and weaker over time. By paying close attention to these signals, an individual can take advantage of them and can train their bowels to open regularly and more easily.

Diet

It is important to eat a diet high in fibre, both soluble and insoluble. The recommended amount of dietary fibre is 20 to 35 grams of fibre per day. Many breakfast cereals are excellent sources of insoluble dietary fibre. By reading the product information panel on the side of the package, patients can determine the number of grams of fibre per serving. Many different fruits and vegetables can be particularly helpful in preventing and treating constipation as they provide plenty of soluble fibre. This is especially true of citrus fruits, prunes, and prune juice. Water intake is also important and should be at least 4 glasses per day. For more information see the accompanying table of fibre content of foods.

Patients who do not like high-fibre foods such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains may take a fibre supplement such as Fybogel in an 8-ounce glass of water one to three times daily. Other fibre supplements available are methylcellulose and guar gum.

Consuming large amounts of dietary or supplementary fibre can cause abdominal bloating or gas and this can be minimized by starting with small amounts and slowly increasing until the stools become softer and more frequent.

Caffeine-containing beverages taken in the morning may be helpful for stimulating bowel action. Seeds, such as flax and sesame, contain oils which also help a lot in promoting bowel action.

Treatment

A variety of drugs and natural products are available for treating constipation. Because of the large number of options, most have not been directly compared in clinical studies. Thus, the choice between them is based upon their mechanism of action, safety, and experience. In general, laxatives can be categorized into the following groups:

Bulk forming

Ispaghula Husk (Fybogel®; Isogel®, Regulan®)

Methylcellulose (Celevac®)

Guar gum

These work by increasing the water content and bulk of stool, which tends to decrease the time needed to pass through the colon.

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Hyperosmolar laxatives

Lactulose
Sorbitol

These reduce water absorption from the colon, thereby wetting the stool. Stools usually become soft, but they are still formed. Lactulose and Sorbitol are also digested by bacteria in the colon, which can produce gas and bloating.

Saline laxatives

Magnesium Hydroxide (Milk of Magnesia®)
Magnesium Citrate
Sodium Picosulphate (Picolax®)

These act similarly to the hyperosmolar laxatives (i.e., they draw water into the colon).

Stimulant laxatives

Senna
Bisacodyl.

These stimulate the intestinal muscle and because of their effectiveness they can be overused. Excessive use of stimulant laxatives may be associated with side effects, including low potassium levels. Therefore these drugs should be used with caution if taken regularly. There is no convincing evidence that chronic use of stimulant laxatives causes structural or functional impairment of the colon, nor do they increase the risk for colorectal cancer or other tumors. If they are, however, overused for long periods, dependency upon them is possible.

New treatments

Tegaserod (Zelnorm®)

This is a drug stimulating serotonin receptors in the intestine. Serotonin is a hormone that is involved in intestinal contractions and sensation. Drugs that stimulate the serotonin receptors increase intestinal contractions and thus provoke a bowel action. It is available by prescription for chronic constipation but is very expensive compared with existing agents. Also being so new we cannot be sure that we know all potential side-effects of long term use. However it may be recommended if response to other medications or treatments is unsatisfactory. Other drugs are being developed and should soon be available.

List of Foods and Their Fibre Content

Please note that in some cases a “serving size” is given in **American Cups**. This is the English equivalent of **8 fluid ounces**. This can be measured by packing the food into a measuring jug. In some cases the fibre content is given per hundred grams, so you will need to adjust your serving size accordingly.

Also note that foods labelled “I” in the final column denote “insoluble” as the predominant fibre, and foods labelled “S” denote “soluble fibre” as the predominant fibre. Your daily requirement (25–30g) should be made up of a balance of the two types, along with your required daily fluid intake (at least 4 glasses/day).

Note that this list is for guideline purposes **only** and is not comprehensive. When in doubt—Refer to the Packet labels.

Food item	Fibre content	Soluble Insoluble
Fruits		
Apple (without skin)	2.9g / medium apple	S
Apple (with skin)	3.5g / medium apple	S
Apricot (fresh)	1.8g / 3 apricots	S
Apricot (dried)	4.8g / 100g	S
Banana	2.5g / medium banana	S
Cherries, sweet	1.2g / 15 cherries	S
Dates	13.5g / cup (chopped)	S
Figs (soft dried)	18.2g / 100g	S
Grapefruit	1.6g / half a fruit	S
Grapes	2.6g / 10 average grapes	S
Oranges	2.6g / average orange	S
Peach (with skin)	2.1g / peach	S
Peach (without skin)	1.4g / peach	S
Pear (with skin)	4.6g / medium pear	S
Pear (without skin)	3.8g / medium pear	S
Pineapple	2.2g / cup (diced)	S
Plums	1.7g / 3 plums	S
Prunes	1g / 1 dried prune	S
Raisins	2.0g / 100g	S
Raspberries	6.3g / cup	S
Strawberries	3.0g / cup	S
Juices		
Apple	0.74 / cup	S
Grapefruit	1.0 / cup	S
Grape	1.3 / cup	S
Orange	1.0 / cup	S
Vegetables		
Asparagus	1.5g / 7 medium spears	S
Beans, green	3.4g / cup	S
Brussel sprouts	4.5g / 7-8 sprouts	S
Cabbage (red/white)	2.9g / cup (cooked)	S
Carrots	4.6g / cup (diced)	S
Cauliflower	2.1g / cup (chopped)	S
Corn, tinned (drained)	4.5g / cup	S
Parsnip	5.4g / cup (cooked, chopped)	S
Peas, green	7.2g / cup (cooked)	S
Potato (without skin)	1.4g / 1 medium (boiled)	S
Potato (with skin)	2.3g / 1 medium (boiled)	S
Spinach	4.1g / 1 cup (raw)	S

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Food item	Fibre content	Soluble Insoluble
Vegetables		
Squash, summer	3.4g / 1 cup (cooked, diced)	S
Sweet potatoes	2.7g / 1 medium, baked	S
Turnip	3.4g / 1 cup (cooked, diced)	S
Zucchini	4.2g / 1 cup (cooked, diced)	S
Bean sprouts	2.6g / cup	S
Celery	3.7g / 1 large stalk	S
Cucumber	0.2g / 6–8 slices with skin	S
Lettuce, sliced	2.0g / large, heaped handful	S
Mushrooms, sliced	0.8g / 1/2 cup	S
Onions, sliced	1.3g / cup	S
Peppers, green	1.0g / average pod	S
Tomato	1.8g / medium tomato	S
Legumes		
Baked beans/tomato sauce	7.3g / 200g tin	S
Dried peas, cooked	4.7g / half cup (cooked)	S
Kidney beans, cooked	7.4g / half cup (cooked)	S
Lentils, cooked	1.9g / half cup (cooked)	S
Cannelini beans, cooked	3.1g / half cup (cooked)	S
Breads, Pastas, Cereals		
Bagels	2.2g / white bagel	I
Cooked porridge (oats)	5.3g / cup	S & I
White bread	0.55g / average medium slice	I
Wholemeal bread	1.66g / average medium slice	I
White Rice	Trace only	
Brown Rice	1.5g / cup (cooked)	
White pasta	2.8g / 75g serving	I
Wholemeal pasta	7.4g / 75g serving	I
Wheat Bran	3.1g / tablespoon	I
Branded breakfast cereals	Considerable variety – Read the Packets	I
Muesli mixes	Considerable variety – Read the Packets	S & I
Nuts		
Almonds	1.8g / 30g serving	I
Hazelnuts	1.6g / 30g serving	I
Peanuts	2.0g / 2 tablespoon serving	S & I
Cashews	1.0g / 2 tablespoon serving	I
Walnuts	1.0g / 2 tablespoon serving	I