



Improving Constipation

Introduction

This booklet has been compiled to help with constipation. It gives advice on diet, exercise and medication. We hope the following information will be useful.

Causes of constipation

Constipation may be caused by any one or all of the following:-

- Lack of fibre-containing foods
- Drinking too little fluid throughout the day
- Lack of exercise
- Some medical conditions
- Some medications

How to prevent constipation—examples of fibre-rich foods

Eat foods that contain plenty of fibre. This means eating less white bread, rolls, sweets, cakes and puddings to allow for the fibre-rich foods which are listed below.

- **Breakfast cereals**—Wholegrain—for example All Bran, Bran Flakes, Weetbix, Shredded Wheat, porridge and muesli.
- **Bread**—choose wholegrain, wholemeal breads or those with added bran or oats. High fibre white bread contains more fibre than ordinary white bread. Remember 'brown' bread may not have any more fibre in than white.
- **Biscuits**—oatcakes, digestives, wholegrain crisp breads, Macvita, Krackawheat, Hovis and brain biscuits. Try making your own biscuits with wholemeal flour, oatmeal or porridge oats.
- **Cereals and pulses**—use brown rice, lentils, all sorts of beans and wholemeal pastas. Wholefood and vegetarian recipe books have plenty of tasty recipes.
- **Nuts and seeds.**
- **Fruit and vegetables**—take at least 5 helpings of fruit and vegetables daily. If you don't like eating vegetables try having them in soups or eat them raw in salads. All kinds of fruit, both fresh and dried, especially oranges, grapefruit, apricots, pineapple, prunes and figs are rich sources of fibre.

N.B.—avoid high fibre foods if you have any symptoms of bloating or are severely constipated or if a bowel obstruction is suspected.

Tip for a high fibre recipe



Mix 2 cups apple sauce with 2 cups unprocessed bran and 1 cup 100% prune juice. Take 30-60 mls with the evening meal.

Fluids

- Fibre-rich foods alone in the diet are not sufficient to resolve constipation. Fluids are also important. Fluids are absorbed by the 'fibre-rich foods' so that stools can be passed more easily.
- You should aim to drink at least 2 litres of fluid every day, i.e. 8-10 mugs.
- Have a hot or warm drink first thing in the morning.
- Some drinks have a laxative effect, such as juice from stewed prunes, fresh orange and grapefruit juice, but not squashes.

Exercise

Exercise helps prevent constipation. Being more active makes you feel better both physically and mentally. If you are unable to do strenuous exercise, walking is very beneficial.

- Leaflets on how to increase physical activity are available.

Medication

It is not recommended you take 'over the counter' laxatives regularly without medical supervision in case you have an undiagnosed problem. Taking laxatives over a prolonged period of time can also cause your bowel to work less efficiently.

However, laxatives prescribed by your doctor should be taken as stated and will not work properly unless taken regularly. Different groups of laxatives have different ways of working in the body such as -

Bulk forming laxatives—these relieve constipation by increasing faecal bulk/mass in your bowel. They stimulate your bowel to work more efficiently but may take a few days to become effective. Medication in this group includes -

- Bran
- Ispaghula husk (Fibogel ®)
- Methylcellulose (Celevax ®)
- Sterculia (Normacol ®)
- Normacol Plus ®

It is **very** important, if you have been prescribed this type of laxative, to increase your fluid consumption (as stated earlier in this booklet) or you may find your constipation becomes worse as faeces can become too dry and hard to pass. These laxatives may also cause an excess of flatulence (wind). Drinking fluids will help to prevent this.



Stimulant laxatives—these laxatives relieve constipation by stimulating your bowel to pass a motion. The results should occur more quickly, often within 12-24 hours. Medication in this group includes:-

- Danthron (co-danthramer)
- Co-danthrusate
- Docusate sodium (Dioctyl)
- Senna (Senokot®)
- Sodium picosulfate (Duco-lax®)
- Bisacodyl (suppositories)
- Glycerine (suppositories)

Because these laxatives increase the movement of the bowel, they sometimes cause abdominal cramps.

Faecal softeners—these laxatives relieve constipation by softening the faeces in your bowel. The action of liquid paraffin works within 12-24 hours. Medication in this group includes:-

- Arachis oil (enemas)
- Liquid paraffin

Osmotic laxatives—these laxatives relieve constipation by softening the faeces in your bowel and work by attracting more fluid into it. Osmotic laxatives work within 18-36 hours. Medication in this group includes:-

- Lactitol
- Lactulose
- Macrogols (movicol)
- Magnesium salts (magnesium hydroxide)
- Phosphates (Fletcher's phosphate enema)
- Sodium citrate (microlax enema)

The laxatives may also cause problems with flatulence.

Problems with flatulence (wind)

This may occur if you increase your fibre intake rapidly and do not drink enough fluids. The following suggestions may help with this problem.

- Eat and drink slowly.
- Take small mouthfuls and chew your food well.



- Avoid food that you think may give you wind; for example—beans, pickles, fizzy drinks, curries and chewing gum.
- A favourite natural remedy is to drink two teaspoons of peppermint water mixed in a small cup of hot water. If you are not diabetic you may sweeten it with a teaspoon of sugar.
- You could try taking charcoal tablets, which are available from your chemist.
- Gentle exercise, especially walking, can bring some relief.
- If the pain becomes severe or persistent, tell your doctor.

Compiled by Linda Cliff—Community Macmillan Nurse and Joyce Donohue—senior dietician.