

CONSTIPATION

Constipation usually happens when bowel motions become harder or drier than usual. This makes them more difficult to pass and you may not pass motions as often. Everyone has their own bowel habit. This habit depends on your diet, fluid intake and how much and when you exercise. You can have bowel motions three times a day or once a week and still be normal. Breast-fed infants, for example, may pass a motion after each feed, or only once every 4-5 days. Children usually settle down to between 0-3 bowel motions a day by age 3 or 4.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of constipation include:

- straining to pass a bowel motion
- discomfort when trying to pass a bowel motion
- motions that are harder or less frequent than normal
- stomach cramps or bloating
- an uncomfortable feeling or pain in the lower back or stomach.

CAUSES

You can become constipated if you:

- don't eat much fibre (e.g. cereal, bread, fresh fruit or vegetables)
- drink less fluid than usual
- have been less active (e.g. after surgery or when travelling)
- put off passing a bowel motion
- are pregnant or have recently had a baby
- are stressed.

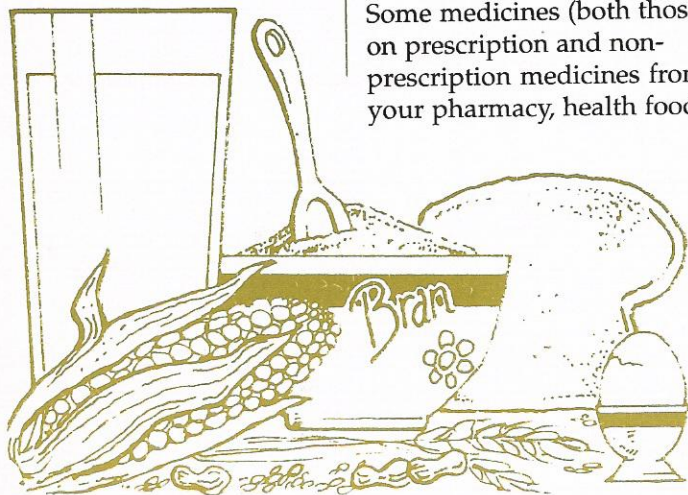
Some medicines (both those on prescription and non-prescription medicines from your pharmacy, health food

shop or supermarket) can also cause constipation. Check with your pharmacist or doctor.

IMPORTANT

Constipation can sometimes be a symptom of a more serious condition. Check with your doctor if:

- your normal bowel habit changes or you swing between getting constipated and having diarrhoea, especially after the age of 40
- your bowel motions become painful
- your motions are blood-stained or black and tar-like
- you need to use laxatives regularly (e.g. every 2-3 days)
- you also feel tired or unwell, are vomiting, have lost weight or have a headache when you're constipated
- the suggestions listed on the back of this card don't help you.



SELF CARE

- Include more fibre in your diet (see *Fibre Fact Card*).
- Drink at least 6-8 glasses of fluid each day (check with your doctor if you have kidney or heart problems). The best fluid is water but you can also drink fruit juice or caffeine-free drinks (caffeine can actually make you lose water).
- Start a new exercise or one you have enjoyed in the past (see *Exercise Fact Cards*).
- Go for a walk after your main meal whenever you can.
- Don't ignore the urge to pass a bowel motion.
- Control your stress – learn to relax (see *Relaxation Techniques Fact Card*).
- If constipated, avoid medicines that can cause constipation e.g. calcium or iron supplements, or antacids containing aluminium. Some pain relievers can also cause constipation. Ask your pharmacist.
- Children may become constipated when being toilet trained if too much pressure is put on them to go. Children's bowel habits can also change if they are upset, unwell or they have disruptions such as moving or travelling.
- If a medicine you need to take causes constipation, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about a suitable laxative (see *Medicine*).

MEDICINE

Constipation that isn't relieved by the suggestions in *Self Care* may require a laxative medicine.

There are different types of laxatives depending on how bad your constipation is and how long you have had it. Ask your pharmacist about the right laxative for you.

- Bulk-forming laxatives work by adding extra fibre or bulk to the diet and by drawing water into the bowel which softens the motions. They can be useful for mild constipation. Take each dose with 1-2 large glasses of water. Bulk-forming laxatives may take 1-3 days to work.
- Some laxatives increase the activity of the bowel muscles, encouraging the passing of a motion. These types of laxative usually take hours to a day to work.
- Other laxatives soften the bowel motions making them easier to pass.

Once your constipation is relieved, follow the suggestions under *Self Care* to help prevent constipation occurring again.

Note: some laxatives can be habit-forming and should only be used for short periods of time to relieve severe constipation – ask your pharmacist.

Your *Self Care* pharmacist

DAVID S. NOLTE, B.Pharm., M.P.S.
701-703 RATHDOWNE STREET, NORTH CARLTON
TEL: 9349 1522 FAX: 9349 1115

Recommended Reading:
CHIARELLI P & MARKWELL S
Let's Get Things Moving
Gore & Osment, 1994

Other Relevant Fact Cards:

- *Fibre*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Exercise Cards*
- *Haemorrhoids*
- *Pain Relievers*

Contact:

Your doctor (listed under Medical Practitioners in the yellow pages of the phone book).

The dietitian of your local hospital (listed under 'Hospitals' in the white pages of the phone book).

Your *Self Care* pharmacist To find:

ACT	(02)	6281 1366
NSW	(02)	9437 5941
QLD	(07)	3844 4900
SA	(08)	8272 1211
TAS	(03)	6231 2636
VIC	(03)	9903 9600
WA	(08)	9388 2886

In case of poisoning, phone the Poisons Information Centre on 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.



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Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask your pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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