

## **Constipation Factsheet**

Over three million people in the UK suffer from constipation once a month or more, and despite being a relatively common complaint most people find it highly embarrassing to talk about.

Constipation is often a very uncomfortable condition that can seriously interfere with your ability to enjoy life. You may experience:

- stomach ache and cramps,
- feeling bloated,
- feeling sick,
- a change in your usual pattern of bowel movements,
- not feeling empty, or a sense of fullness,
- headache,
- furred tongue,
- loss of appetite,
- fatigue, and
- depression.

How do you know if you are constipated?

Normal bowel habits vary between people. Some people go more than once a day; other people may go every three days. If you experience a variation in your routine that means that you go to the toilet less often, this is constipation.

If you are going to the toilet as often as usual but you are having difficulty passing stools because they are hard and small, this is also constipation. It is important to know what is 'normal' for you.

A person is considered to suffer from constipation when they:

- have fewer than three bowel movements a week;
- have to strain severely in order to defecate;
- produce hard stools.

Constipation may come on suddenly (acute constipation) and last only a couple of days. If you find that constipation persists for a longer time (for more than one week), or returns soon after treating it, or if you are experiencing stomach pains along with constipation, or if you see traces of blood or mucus on your stools, please see your doctor.

Constipation can be caused by:

- Not drinking enough fluid.
- Not getting enough fibre (fruit, vegetables, wholegrain cereals).
- Physical inactivity.
- Drugs such as painkillers containing codeine, antidepressants, and antacids – because they contain calcium or aluminium.
- A high calcium or iron intake
- Pregnancy.
- Advancing age - bowel muscles become weaker and older people are more likely to take medication that affects the bowels.
- Anxiety and stress

To avoid constipation, a healthy diet and lifestyle can go a long way to helping to keep your digestive system in tip-top condition.

It's a well-known fact that exercise is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. So, it isn't surprising that regular exercise is a very effective way of helping our digestive system to stay healthy too.

A healthy, balanced diet is an essential part of a healthy digestion. That means having a wide variety of foods, drinking plenty of water, eating more fibre-rich foods and eating meals at regular times so that you are able to relax whilst enjoying your food.

Water carries out very important functions in our body. If we do not drink enough water, our bodies can respond by extracting more water from the colon, drying up the contents and making bowel movements more infrequent and difficult.

Fibre helps our digestive system work efficiently. Fibre is not absorbed into the body during digestion; instead, it passes all the way through the digestive tract, and is expelled when we defecate. Fibre helps keep the contents of the colon soft, and makes it easier for the muscles of the colon to push the contents along. Fruits and vegetables are rich in fibre – try to have 5 portions each day. Choose wholegrain foods like: wholemeal or granary bread, brown rice and pasta, bran-based breakfast cereals or porridge. These are all a good source of fibre.