



## Chronic Constipation

Constipation is a common health issue that everyone might experience at some point. However, when it becomes a persistent problem, it's known as chronic constipation. This condition can significantly impact your quality of life, but it can be managed effectively with the right knowledge and tools.

### What is Chronic Constipation?

Chronic constipation is when a person experiences hard or lumpy stool that is difficult to pass. It's generally described as having fewer than three weekly bowel movements that persist for several weeks or longer. This condition affects a significant portion of the population, particularly young children and the elderly, and occurs more frequently in females than males.



### The Digestive Process: A Journey Through Your Body

To understand constipation, it's crucial to know about the digestive process. When you eat, the food travels through your digestive tract. The time it takes for food to move from your mouth to be eliminated as waste is known as transit time. This can vary from person to person, ranging from 12 to 72 hours.

The journey begins in the mouth, where food is broken down into smaller pieces by chewing and mixed with saliva. It then travels down the esophagus and into the stomach, where it is mixed with stomach acid to break down the food further.

The partially digested food, now a thick liquid, moves into the small intestine. Here, nutrients are absorbed into the bloodstream. The remaining waste, mostly water and indigestible parts of food, moves into the colon or large intestine.

The colon plays a significant role in this process. Its primary function is to absorb water from the remaining indigestible food matter. If the transit time is long, meaning food passes slowly through the colon, too much water is absorbed, making the stool hard and difficult to pass.

### Factors Contributing to Constipation: More Than Just Diet

Several factors can contribute to constipation, often by altering the transit time. These include:

- Medication side effects: Some drugs, such as certain antidepressants, narcotics, and iron supplements, can lead to constipation. These medications can slow down the transit time by reducing the contractions in the intestines or increasing the amount of water absorbed from the stool.
- Physiological diseases: Conditions like diabetes, stroke, hypothyroidism, or Parkinson's disease can affect bowel movement. These diseases can alter the nervous control of the intestines, leading to slower transit times and harder stools.
- Functional disorders include conditions like irritable bowel syndrome or intestinal obstructions resulting from surgery. These disorders can disrupt the normal functioning of the intestines, leading to constipation.
- Diet and lifestyle choices: Consuming a diet low in fiber and fluid, insufficient physical activity, and chronic use of laxatives can contribute to constipation. Fiber adds bulk to the stool, making it easier to pass, while fluids help keep it soft. Regular physical activity can help stimulate the natural contractions of intestinal muscles, aiding in the movement of stool.

### Symptoms and Complications: More Than Just Infrequent Bowel Movements

The primary symptom of constipation is infrequent bowel movements resulting in hard, lumpy, dry stool. Other symptoms include rectal pressure or fullness, bloating, abdominal pain, and a sensation of incomplete evacuation. These symptoms can significantly impact a person's quality of life, leading to discomfort and distress.

Complications can arise from the intense straining needed to pass stool. These include hemorrhoids, swollen blood vessels in the rectum or anus that can cause discomfort and bleeding; anal fissures, small tears in the anus that can cause pain and bleeding; diverticular disease, small pouches that form in the colon wall that can become inflamed or infected; rectal bleeding, which can be a sign of a more serious condition; and rectal prolapse, where a small amount of intestinal lining is pushed out of the anal opening.

### Managing Chronic Constipation: A Multifaceted Approach

Managing chronic constipation often involves a combination of dietary and lifestyle modifications, physiotherapy, and medication therapy.

#### Dietary and Lifestyle Modifications

A well-balanced diet rich in fiber and adequate fluid intake can help prevent and manage constipation. Foods high in fiber include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. Regular physical activity, such as brisk walking, can also help stimulate the natural contractions of intestinal muscles.

## Medication Therapy

If constipation does not improve with diet and lifestyle changes, several supplements and medications are available. These include bulk-forming agents, which add bulk and water to the stool, helping it pass more easily; stool softeners, which add water to the stool to soften it; lubricants, which coat the stool to make it slippery; stimulants, which speed up the movement of stool through the intestines; and hyperosmotic, which draw water into the intestines to soften the stool. It's important to consult with your healthcare provider before starting any new medication regimen.

Chronic constipation can be a challenging condition to live with, but with the right knowledge and tools, it can be effectively managed. If your bowel habits change drastically for no apparent reason, be sure to consult your physician.

### **Center For Digestive Health & Nutrition**

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The Center for Digestive Health & Nutrition is a private medical practice comprised of experienced Gastroenterologists, Nurse Practitioners, and staff members dedicated to preventing and treating digestive disorders. Our physicians have been serving the needs of those in Western Pennsylvania and surrounding areas since 1977, having cared for tens of thousands of individuals with digestive problems. Our mission is to deliver high-quality gastroenterology services efficiently and cost-consciously. We realize the very sensitive nature of GI illness and understand the necessity to provide our services in an environment that stresses patient privacy and confidentiality and where patient satisfaction is the goal. Appointments can be conveniently scheduled online via our website above. Learn more about digestive issues on Instagram @thedigestivetract

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