

Dietary considerations for constipation

As food moves through the digestive tract we break it down and absorb the nutrients. Any food not digested is collected in the end part of the digestive tract called the colon. Here water is removed from it and it forms the stool, which is then pushed out as a bowel movement.

Everyone will open their bowels at different times and different amounts throughout the week. For some opening their bowels once per day is normal whereas for others opening them just once per week is normal.

Constipation can occur when the digestive tract does not move the stool through as quickly as normal. This can make it difficult to pass the stool and can cause straining and discomfort. Constipation can cause physical discomfort and pain but it can also add to stress and worry.

There are a number of lifestyle changes that can help with constipation.

Fluid

Drinking enough fluid is one of the most important lifestyle factors that can affect constipation. If you are dehydrated, your body will try to remove as much fluid from the stool as it can while it is in the colon, causing it to become harder and more difficult to pass.

Drinking plenty of fluid makes your stool softer and easier to pass. Aim to drink between 8-10 large glasses (1.5-2litres) of fluid per day.

This doesn't have to be water, it can be squash, fruit juices, soft drinks, tea or coffee. People often believe that tea and coffee have a dehydrating effect but the fluid they provide more than makes up for any small dehydrating effect from the caffeine.

If it feels difficult to drink then consider introducing foods with a high fluid content such as cereal, porridge, soups, fruit and vegetables.

Fibre

Contrary to popular belief, a very high fibre diet is not always the best thing for constipation. A good fibre intake alongside a good fluid intake is the best thing to help manage constipation.

Fibre is the part of plant based foods that we can't digest. It forms the bulk of our stools and also helps it to pass along the digestive tract.

There are two main types of fibre:

1. Soluble fibre

Dissolves in water in the bowel to form a gel-type substance. Soluble fibre encourages the growth of 'good' bacteria within the bowel. It also acts to help keep the stool soft and so help it pass through more easily.

Sources of soluble fibre include:

- **Oats**
- **Fruits**; particularly ones eaten with the skin or seeds (berries, apples, oranges) and dried fruit (raisins, apricots, prunes)
- **Vegetables** – particularly those eaten with the skin or seeds (peas, courgettes, tomatoes)
- **Beans, peas and lentils**

2. Insoluble fibre

Absorbs water within the bowel but does not dissolve. Insoluble fibre adds bulk to the stool which helps it to be pushed through the bowel.

- **Breakfast cereals**; Weetabix, Bran cereal, Muesli, Shredded Wheat
- **Wholemeal bread and pasta**
- **Potato skins**

If you feel you need to increase your fibre intake start by increasing your intake of fruits and vegetables (soluble fibre) rather than high fibre cereals. It is also important to increase your fibre intake slowly to allow the body to adjust.

Linseeds

Linseeds (also known as flaxseeds) are high in soluble fibre and act as a natural laxative. They can be bought from supermarkets as brown or golden whole linseeds/flaxseeds, cracked linseeds or ground linseeds.

They should be started at one teaspoon a day, which can be added to cereal, yoghurt, porridge or soups. This can gradually be increased up to two tablespoons per day. As they will absorb water, it is important to ensure a good fluid intake.

Linseed can decrease the absorption of some medications therefore it is advised to take medication one to two hours before or after having linseed.

Movement

Keeping active and mobile will reduce the risk of constipation. Gentle activity, where appropriate can help to stimulate the bowel.

Positioning on the toilet

Positioning for a bowel movement can have a big impact on it being passed successfully.

1. Sit comfortably on the toilet and if possible place feet on a footstool about 20-30cm high. If a footstool is unavailable or uncomfortable then a cushion or thick book can be used. The aim of that the knees are slightly higher than the hips.
2. Lean forward and put your elbows or forearms on your knees.
3. Try to relax and avoid straining. Give yourself plenty of time

Other factors that can contribute to constipation

Causes of constipation are often complex and can be caused by a number of factors. Medications, certain illness, surgery and a reduction in appetite can all cause or contribute to constipation. Depending on the cause, the lifestyle factors above may not always be able to provide relief. Please speak to your Dorothy House professional about other options which may be available to you.