

Diarrhea

Diarrhea is defined as loose, watery stools occurring more than three times in one day. This is a problem that usually lasts a day or two and goes away on its own without any special treatment. However, prolonged diarrhea can be a sign of other problems.

Diarrhea can cause dehydration, which means the body lacks enough fluid to function properly. Although dehydration is particularly dangerous in children and in the elderly it can effect people of all ages and must be treated promptly to avoid serious health problems. The average otherwise healthy adult has an average of 4 bouts of diarrhea per year.

What causes diarrhea?

Some people develop diarrhea after stomach surgery or removal of the gallbladder. The reason may be a change in how quickly food moves through the digestive system after stomach surgery or an increase in bile in the colon that can occur after gallbladder surgery.

In many cases, the cause of diarrhea cannot be found. As long as diarrhea goes away on its own, and extensive search for the cause is not usually necessary.

People who visit foreign countries are at risk for traveler's diarrhea, which is caused by eating food or drinking water contaminated with bacteria, viruses, or, sometimes, parasites. Traveler's diarrhea is a particular problem for people visiting developing countries. Visitors to the United States, Canada, most European countries, Japan, Australia and New Zealand do not face much risk for traveler's diarrhea.

Some other causes for diarrhea are:

- Bacterial infections. Several types of bacteria, consumed through contaminated food or water, can cause diarrhea. Common culprits include Campylobacter, Salmonella, Shigella, and Escherichia coli.
- Viral infections. Many viruses cause diarrhea, including rotavirus, Norwalk virus, cytomegalovirus, herpes simplex virus, and viral hepatitis.

How is constipation treated?

Although treatment depends on the cause, severity, and duration of the constipation, in most cases dietary and lifestyle changes will help relieve symptoms and help prevent them from recurring.

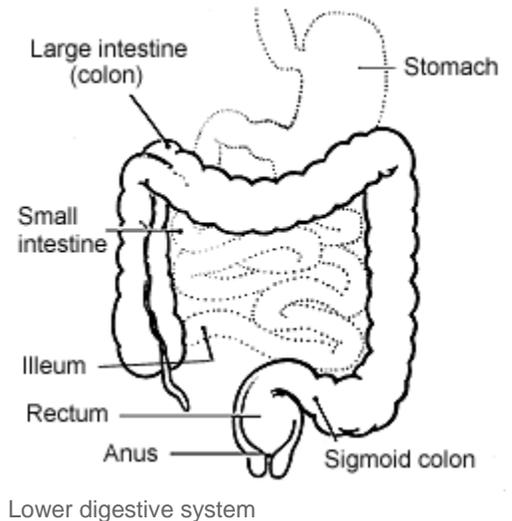
Diet

A diet with enough fiber (20 to 35 grams each day) helps the body form soft, bulky stool. A doctor or dietitian can help plan an appropriate diet. High-fiber foods include beans, whole grains and bran cereals, fresh fruits, and vegetables such as asparagus, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and carrots. For people prone to constipation, limiting foods that have little or no fiber, such as ice cream, cheese, meat, and processed foods, is also important.

Lifestyle Changes

Other changes that may help treat and prevent constipation include drinking enough water and other liquids, such as fruit and vegetable juices and clear soups, so as not to become dehydrated, engaging in daily exercise, and reserving enough time to have a bowel movement. In addition, the urge to have a bowel movement should not be ignored.

Can constipation be serious?



Sometimes constipation can lead to complications. These complications include hemorrhoids, caused by straining to have a bowel movement, or anal fissures (tears in the skin around the anus) caused when hard stool stretches the sphincter muscle. As a result, rectal bleeding may occur, appearing as bright red streaks on the surface of the stool. Treatment for hemorrhoids may include warm tub baths, ice packs, and application of a special cream to the affected area. Treatment for anal fissures may include stretching the sphincter muscle or surgically removing the tissue or skin in the affected area.

Sometimes straining causes a small amount of intestinal lining to push out from the anal opening. This condition, known as rectal prolapse, may lead to secretion of mucus from the anus. Usually eliminating the cause of the prolapse, such as straining or coughing, is the only treatment necessary. Severe or chronic prolapse requires surgery to strengthen and tighten the anal sphincter muscle or to repair the prolapsed lining.

Constipation may also cause hard stool to pack the intestine and rectum so tightly that the normal pushing action of the colon is not enough to expel the stool. This condition, called fecal impaction, occurs most often in children and older adults. An impaction can be softened with mineral oil taken by mouth and by an enema. After softening the impaction, the doctor may break up and remove part of the hardened stool by inserting one or two fingers into the anus.

Points to Remember

- Constipation affects almost everyone at one time or another.
- Many people think they are constipated when, in fact, their bowel movements are regular.
- The most common causes of constipation are poor diet and lack of exercise.
- Other causes of constipation include medications, irritable bowel syndrome, abuse of laxatives, and specific diseases.
- A medical history and physical exam may be the only diagnostic tests needed before the doctor suggests treatment.
- In most cases, following these simple tips will help relieve symptoms and prevent recurrence of constipation:
 - Eat a well-balanced, high-fiber diet that includes beans, bran, whole grains, fresh fruits, and vegetables.
 - Drink plenty of liquids.
 - Exercise regularly.
 - Set aside time after breakfast or dinner for undisturbed visits to the toilet.
 - Do not ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.
 - Understand that normal bowel habits vary.
 - Whenever a significant or prolonged change in bowel habits occurs, check with a doctor.
- Most people with mild constipation do not need laxatives. However, a doctor may recommend laxatives for a limited time for people with chronic constipation.