

Constipation

Recommendations

A healthy bowel pattern is different for everyone. Maintaining regular bowel movements helps to prevent constipation. Some individuals may have bowel movements more frequently than others. The goal is to have a pattern that is consistent and painless.

Preventing and treating constipation can be achieved by:

- Eating a variety of foods from the four food groups in Canada's Food Guide.
- Eating small meals and snacks throughout the day.
- Consuming the recommended amounts of fibre each day.
- Drinking plenty of fluids each day.
- Engaging in regular physical activity.
- Responding to the urge to have a bowel movement.

Health Benefits

Following the recommendations above:

- Promotes a regular bowel pattern.
- May decrease the risk of colon cancer.¹

Key Questions

What is constipation?

Constipation is defined as abnormally delayed or infrequent passage of dry hardened stools,² and also as three or fewer spontaneous bowel movements per week.¹

Possible causes of constipation have not been systematically evaluated. Factors which may cause constipation are:³

- A lack of dietary fibre in some individuals
- A lack of exercise
- Irritable bowel syndrome



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- Obesity
- Pregnancy
- Some diseases such as Parkinson’s, multiple sclerosis, stroke, diabetes, lupus.
- Some medications
- Stress/depression/anxiety⁴

What lifestyle strategies may help prevent or treat constipation?³

- Eat enough fibre. Refer to the ‘[How much fibre is needed?](#)’ section. Types of fibre include cellulose, psyllium, inulin, and oligosaccharides. These sources of fibre are primarily found in the skins of fruits, vegetables, wheat and rice bran, and whole wheat.
- Increase fluid intake. Refer to the “[How much fluid is needed?](#)” section.
- Participate in daily physical activity.
- Eat a source of pro/prebiotic daily. Pregnant women should consult with their healthcare provider before starting pre/probiotics.
- Avoid stool retention and initiate bowel retraining if required.
- Consider use of bulk-forming supplements such as psyllium, or methylcellulose.

How much fibre is needed?

The daily recommendations for fibre intake are:⁵

Age (years)	Fibre (g) for Males	Fibre (g) for Females*
1–3	19	19
4–8	25	25
9–13	31	26
14–50	38	25
Over 50	30	21

*Pregnant women should aim for 28 grams of fibre daily; lactating women should aim for 29 grams of fibre daily.⁵

Refer to the [How can fibre be increased in the diet?](#) section.

What types of fibre promote a healthy bowel pattern?

Fibre intake may be related to constipation as it contributes to fecal bulk and decreases in stool transit time.³

Many higher fibre foods contain both soluble and insoluble fibre. Soluble fibre is a soft fibre that dissolves in water. It helps lower blood cholesterol and control blood sugars.¹

Soluble fibre can also be helpful in alleviating constipation.⁶

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Best sources of soluble fibre are:

- oat bran
- oatmeal
- apples
- strawberries
- psyllium husks (added to cereals such as All Bran Buds®)
- legumes such as beans and lentils
- barley
- citrus fruits

Insoluble fibre does not dissolve in water. It helps prevent constipation, keeps the digestive system healthy and lowers the risk of certain cancers and heart disease.¹

Best sources of water-insoluble fibre are:

- wheat bran
- whole grain foods such as whole grain breads and cereals
- vegetables and fruits (especially those with seeds and skins)
- legumes, such as peas, beans and lentils.

How can fibre be increased in the diet?

It is important to meet the recommended amounts of fibre for gender and age. Individuals can increase fibre in the diet by:

- Increase fluid intake when increasing fibre intake.^{1,5}
- Increase fibre intake slowly to allow the bowel time to adapt.¹
- Eating high fibre foods at each meal, such as: whole grains, whole grain breads and cereals, vegetables, fruit, legumes such as beans and peas.
- Reading food labels (especially the Nutrition Facts table) and choosing foods with 2 grams of fibre or more per serving.
- Adding 1 to 2 tablespoons of bran and/or wheat germ to recipes such as meatloaf, casseroles, baked goods and cereals.
- Adding vegetables and fruit to salads, casseroles, muffins and other baked goods.
- Eating small amounts of dried fruit like dates, raisins, and apricots. Caution should be practiced; too much dried fruit can cause cramping, bloating and gas.
- Adding prunes and prune juice to the diet on occasion. Prunes are a natural laxative that can help alleviate constipation. Using small amounts of prunes and prune juice at a time is recommended because too much can cause undesirable gastrointestinal symptoms.

Remember to increase fibre gradually, as the body needs time to adjust to higher intakes of fibre. Too much fibre at once can cause cramping, bloating and gas.

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How much fluid is needed?

The relationship between fibre and fluid is not completely understood. There are some studies that indicate high fibre diets increase fecal water loss significantly.⁷

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics recommends that individuals increase fluid intake when increasing fibre intake to replace the fecal fluid losses that occur with higher stool weight.¹ Individuals should meet at least the minimum daily fluid requirements for their age group (see below).

The recommendations for fluids are:⁸

Gender	Age (years)	Daily Recommendations ^{a,b}
Female	2-3	1000 mL (4 cups)
	4-8	1400 mL (5 cups)
	9-13	1700 mL (7 cups)
	14-18	1800 mL (7 cups)
	Over 19	2200 mL (9 cups)
	Pregnancy - all ages	2400 mL (10 cups)
	Lactation - all ages	3000 mL (12 cups)
Male	2-3	1000 mL (4 cups)
	4-8	1400 mL (5 cups)
	9-13	1900 mL (8 cups)
	14-18	2600 mL (10 cups)
	Over 19	3000 mL (12 cups)

a. Refers to total amount of fluids from caloric and non-caloric beverages. Juice should be limited to ½ cup per day. For children 4 to 13 years, milk intake from ‘all fluids’ should equal 2 cups per day. For youth 14 to 18 years, milk intake from ‘all fluids’ should equal 3 cups per day.

b. Amounts listed are the adequate intakes for fluid, minus the water content in food eaten. Water content of food accounts for about 20% of total water intake.⁸

How much physical activity is recommended?

Individuals should engage in regular physical activity that is enjoyable and consistent. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has detailed information and recommendations about physical activity for all ages. The Agency’s resources and handouts are available from: Being active-Canada.ca

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Should individuals take fibre supplements or laxatives?

The best way for an individual to get the fibre needed in their diet is from fibre-containing foods.¹ Although some fibre supplements may be helpful, few have been studied for physiological effectiveness. Also, fibre supplements and laxatives lack many nutrients found in higher fibre foods.

Fibre can be helpful in alleviating constipation.⁶ It is safe to use concentrated fibre sources such as Metamucil®, plain Prodiem®, or inulin powders such as Benefibre®. Starting with a half or a quarter of the regular dose and increasing slowly is recommended. It is important to drink lots of fluid when taking a fibre supplement.

Commercial laxatives should not be used long-term. If constipation is an ongoing problem, a physician should be consulted.

When is constipation a more serious concern?

Usually, constipation itself is not a problem. Sometimes, however, it is a symptom of a more serious condition. If any of the symptoms listed below are present, a physician should be consulted:

- Constipation that does not resolve after a few weeks of increased fibre and liquid intake
- Constipation alternating with episodes of diarrhea
- Rectal bleeding
- Mucus and/or blood in stool
- Abdominal pain
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite

What is chronic constipation?

Chronic constipation is defined as unsatisfactory defecation and is characterized by infrequent stools, difficult stool passage, or both. In order to be deemed chronic, these symptoms must be present for at least three months in a year.⁹

How is chronic constipation managed?

Chronic constipation may be a symptom of other medical conditions or chronic diseases and requires consultation with a healthcare professional, such as a physician, nurse and/or registered dietitian.

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Are there any handouts on constipation that I can use with my patients?

Refer to approved provincial Alberta Health Services nutrition education handouts at ahs.ca/NutritionHandouts to support patient education. For more information contact nutrition_resources@ahs.ca

References

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