

CONSTIPATION

What is it?

Constipation means reduced frequency of bowel movements which are too firm and are somewhat difficult or painful to pass. Often there is a sensation of fullness or needing to “go to the bathroom” with an inability to do so easily. Generally, there should be an urge to defecate after meals, especially in the morning, and not heeding this feeling may suppress the ability to have the bowel movement later when it seems more convenient.

Occasional difficulty having bowel movements occurs commonly in people and usually resolves by itself without medical intervention. The causes for intermittent constipation can be related to inadequate fluid or fiber intake or due to prolonged sitting. Simple changes in personal habits can have a positive impact on this problem. Long term or ongoing problems with constipation may be caused by a medical condition, and consultation with a medical provider may be needed to find an appropriate therapy. Overuse of certain laxatives or cathartics may complicate the situation by causing dependence on their use.

Why do I have this problem?

Lifestyles of college students are often hectic and somewhat erratic. Meals may be missed and junk food substituted for foods that are healthier and higher in fiber. Over use of caffeinated beverages and alcohol dehydrate the system and inadequate water intake further complicates this problem. Beyond these dietary issues are the aspects of insufficient exercise and spending too much time sitting. In addition, some students feel uncomfortable using public restrooms and may postpone defecating until they have more privacy.

Complications of Constipation

With difficult and overly firm bowel movements, it is not unusual to experience a small amount of tearing of anal tissue (fissure) when the stool is passed. Prolonged pressure to pass stool or sitting for long periods on the toilet may cause a swollen rectal blood vessel (hemorrhoid). Both of these problems most often are minor and resolve on their own, but may cause rectal bleeding which is always concerning. Hemorrhoids may also become very painful if blood clots within them. Medical care may be needed for proper diagnosis and treatment in more severe cases. A separate handout is available on HEMORRHOIDS.

Treatment

Treating a short term bout of constipation may be as simple as making dietary changes. Adding fluids and high fiber foods is both a treatment and prevention. Eating foods high in fructose (or drinking their juice) such as apple, pear, raisins, prunes, and grapes may be sufficient. Fiber can be added to the diet by eating nuts, whole grains, bran cereal, or by

using a fiber supplement (Psyllium or methylcellulose). Some brand names are Metamucil and Fiberall. These products are readily available without a prescription at pharmacies and grocery stores, but it is important to follow their directions and guidelines for use.

Stool softener products are also available over the counter. Docusate sodium sold under various brand names, such as Colace, may be used for short term treatment to make a bowel movement easier as they add an oily compound to the stool.

In a severe case of constipation, laxatives may be used for a short time. These are also available without a prescription and are safe for occasional use as long as instructions are followed. Most people have heard of Ex-Lax, but there are many other products on the market that are inexpensive and gentle on the system. Suppositories, enemas and strong laxatives should be avoided as they are harsh on the body and may lead to medical complications with overuse. For chronic constipation, a medical provider should be consulted and a treatment plan devised, as other products such as Lactulose and Polyethelene Glycol can be quite effective but require a prescription to purchase.

Prevention

Some people are more prone to this condition and may have to make ongoing changes to their diet or habits to prevent constipation. Be aware of food choices that are higher in fiber such as brown rice instead of white, potatoes including the skins, whole grain bread rather than white and cereals which have bran or whole grains. Fruits and vegetables should be a mainstay of any diet due to their high vitamin and mineral content as well as their fiber content. Most college age people will note constipation being a problem during certain times such as traveling or camping when fresh fruits and vegetables are more difficult to obtain. Increasing fiber with a fiber supplement and drinking plenty of water, along with some daily exercise can help you through these times when you have less control over eating a well balanced diet. A nutritionist may also have suggestions that fit your personal lifestyle.