



Health Matters

SDSU Student Health Services

General Health

Constipation

Description

Constipation is the infrequent passage of stools, which are most often drier or harder than normal. Generally, it's uncomfortable and elimination can be difficult and painful. Almost everyone gets constipated at some time during his or her life. Constipation affects approximately 2% of the U.S. population. Women and the elderly are more commonly affected.

Causes of constipation

Stools can become hard and dry due to too much water being absorbed through the intestines. Some causes of constipation are:

- Inactivity/Lack of Exercise
- High level of caffeine in diet
- Eating on the run
- Eating a lot of highly refined, low fiber, and processed foods
- Not eating enough fruits and vegetables
- Stress

Is constipation serious?

Each person's bowel habits will differ. Some people have several bowel movements daily, others only once a day or less. Depending on your diet, especially changes in your diet, your bowel movements will vary.

Chronic constipation (or continuous bouts of constipation) is sometimes associated with other conditions, including hemorrhoids (dilated veins that develop on the anorectal area), fissures that are cracks in the anal skin and diverticular disease (small out pockets in the colon that results from the increased pressure it takes to move the stool through the colon). Though it's not common, constipation can also be a sign of more serious disorders. Make an appointment with a medical provider if you are having problems with chronic constipation.

Prevention

The following are some preventive measures that can help the intestinal tract get back into shape:

1. EAT FOODS HIGH IN FIBER AND WHOLE GRAINS. Stay away from fast foods and prepackaged foods as they often have little fiber. High fiber foods are important because they add bulk to keep other food substances moving through the digestive tract. Fiber also holds water and tends to soften the stool. High fiber foods include:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables (i.e., apples and peaches with the skin left on)
- Wheat or rice bran (i.e., shredded wheat, oatmeal, cornflakes)
- Beans
- Nuts (i.e., peanuts, brazil nuts)
- Whole wheat breads

2. DO NOT SKIP MEALS. EAT REGULARLY THROUGHOUT THE DAY.

3. DRINK PLENTY OF LIQUIDS SUCH AS FRUIT AND VEGETABLE JUICES, MILK AND ESPECIALLY WATER.

- Drinking 6-8 glasses of fluids per day will help keep the extra fiber well hydrated.
- Both caffeinated and alcoholic beverages are dehydrating since they cause an increase in urination and can cause constipation (though they can also be irritating and cause diarrhea). If you do choose to drink these, be sure to drink plenty of water to replace lost fluids.

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4. EXERCISE REGULARLY.

- This helps to keep your body in shape overall and will relieve any stress that may be causing constipation.

5. BECOME MORE SENSITIVE TO YOUR BOWEL MOVEMENTS AND DO NOT RESIST THE URGE TO GO TO THE BATHROOM for too long.

- Your body sends you signals for a reason. Resisting can cause difficulty and constipation later.

6. AVOID STRAINING.

- Although it isn't always possible to do so, it is best to wait for your body to move the bowels themselves. Be patient and let nature take its course.

7. ALWAYS REPORT ANY SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN BOWEL HABITS TO YOUR MEDICAL PROVIDER.

- They will know whether or not these changes are important.
- Also, if there are any significant changes in the appearance of your bowel movements, such as blood, consult your medical provider.

8. AVOID LAXATIVES.

- Regular use of laxatives can produce chronic irritation of the bowel. It also depletes the body of water and can result in a dependence situation.

Treatments

Laxatives are sometimes used for immediate relief from constipation, but they should be used sparingly and with extreme caution.

Laxatives should never be taken if other symptoms indicate that a person may have appendicitis. A health care provider should be contacted immediately if this appears to be the case. Regular use of strong laxatives that contain chemicals and vegetable irritants (i.e., Cascara or sagra) may not relieve constipation. Instead they may actually worsen constipation in some cases.

Other treatments must be aimed at removing the cause of the disorder, such as a drug side effect, improper diet, or depression. Nonirritant purgatives, called bulking agents, help to return the bowel to its normal rhythm. Regularity in bowel movements and eating habits should be attempted by a diet containing vegetable fiber, bran, cellulose, or other bulk. This will help to produce large, soft feces, which are easily passed through the intestine.

For More Information:

Student Health Services619-594-5281
Health Promotion.619-594-4133
Visit Our Website at shs.sdsu.edu
Facebook/Twitter.Facebook.com/aztehealth &
@AZTEhealth