



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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Constipation

Constipation, though rarely a serious medical problem, is a common complaint from patients who have a slowing down of bowel habits or whose stools are hard, dry, and difficult to eliminate. There is a wide variation of normal from person to person. Many people have been conditioned to think that a daily bowel movement is necessary when, in fact, a bowel movement once a week is sufficient for some healthy people.

Constipation may be a result of life style - being too busy to obey the urge to defecate, poor eating habits, decrease in fluid intake, a change from an active life to a more sedentary one, and depression, anxiety and tension. Constipation may also be caused by certain drugs, chronic diseases, and pregnancy.

If constipation has progressed long enough you may experience fullness and pain anywhere in the abdomen, and it may be severe. Other symptoms include loss of appetite, discomfort after eating, increase in belching and passing gas per rectum and "diarrhea." This diarrhea may be due to leakage of liquid feces around a hard stool.

Treatment

Treatment consists of drinking increased amounts of fluid, and adding foods high in fiber to your diet. Examples include: fresh fruits (prunes and prune juice, avoid bananas) and vegetables, whole-wheat breads and cereals, and bran. Increasing your level of physical activity may also be helpful. Occasionally a bulk producing agent (Psyllium) or a stool softener will be prescribed. Rarely, disposable enemas or milk of magnesia will be prescribed for temporary relief.

Prevention includes altering your diet, increasing fluid intake and activity level. **Above all, don't ignore the urge to move your bowels!**

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