Constipation

Patient information leaflet

Common Ailments Service

Only use this leaflet if your pharmacist has advised you about your condition.

Constipation is a condition in which you do not pass stools (poo) as often as you usually do. Your poo may be hard and lumpy, and larger or smaller than usual. It may be difficult and painful for you to poo, and you may get cramping pains in the lower part of your tummy. You may also feel bloated and sick.

Constipation may be caused by:

- not eating enough fibre, such as fruit, vegetables or cereals
- changing your daily routine or the type of food you eat
- not drinking enough water or other fluids
- lack of exercise or moving less than is usual for you
- stress, anxiety or depression
- pregnancy
- ignoring the urge to poo

Some medicines can cause constipation, including certain painkillers, antidepressants, medicines for indigestion called antacids, and iron tablets. Speak to your pharmacist if you think your medicines may be making you constipated.

Medical conditions that can cause constipation include irritable bowel syndrome, underactive thyroid, and conditions that make the gut move slowly.

Treatment and Prevention

Making changes to your diet and lifestyle can help to make your poo softer and easier to pass.
Try to:

- eat regular meals
- make sure that your diet is healthy and balanced, with whole grains, vegetables, and fruits or fruit juice such as kiwi, apples, apricots, grapes, raisins, peaches, pears, plums, prunes, raspberries, or strawberries
- gradually increase your fibre intake by eating more bread made with wholemeal (wholewheat or wholegrain) flour, wholegrain breakfast cereals, brown rice, wholemeal pasta, fruit and vegetables or flaxseed and linseed
- drink at least 2 litres of fluid each day (about 8 to 10 cups)
- go for a daily walk or run - this can help you poo regularly
- avoid alcohol because it dehydrates you, even though it is a fluid
- find a place and a time of day when you can spend time on the toilet
- respond to your body - when you feel the urge to go to the toilet, do not delay
- rest your feet on a low footstool while you are using the toilet if it is comfortable - having your knees above the level of your hips can make it easier to poo

Treatment and Prevention

Medicines that can help

These medicines are not suitable for everyone. Make sure you have asked your pharmacist for advice about what treatment is best for you.

If diet and lifestyle changes alone do not work for you, a **laxative** may help. These are medicines that help you poo more regularly. Your pharmacist will advise on the best treatment for you.

Most laxatives can cause side effects such as bloating, flatulence (farting or wind), feeling sick, and some tummy pain, but these are usually mild and get better over time. Keep drinking plenty of water while you're taking the laxative. Stop taking the laxative when your poo becomes easier to pass again.

Ispaghula husk, **macrogol** and **lactulose** work by softening your poo to make it easier to pass. If you do not poo normally within 3 days, go back to the pharmacy for further advice.

Senna and **docusate** are stimulant laxatives that work by stimulating your gut muscles to help move poo along your bowel. Docusate also softens poo. Your pharmacist may recommend these laxatives if you still have constipation after trying another laxative. If you do not poo normally within 3 days contact your GP or NHS 111.

Ideally, only take laxatives occasionally and for up to a week at a time. Gradually stop taking the laxative when your constipation improves. When you have stopped taking the laxative, continue to drink plenty of water, include fibre in your diet and exercise regularly to prevent you from getting constipation again.

Always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine.
If you are concerned about any side effects from a treatment, report it to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist. You can also report side effects on the Yellow Card app or website.

When to Get Help

Ask for a GP appointment if:

- making changes to your diet and lifestyle and using laxatives has not worked
- you start to think that the medicines you are taking are making you constipated - strong painkillers, iron and calcium supplements can make you constipated
- you have begun to be constipated or bloated regularly

When to Get Help

Ask for an urgent GP appointment or call 111 if:

- you notice blood or mucus in your poo
- you start to feel as though you have not emptied your bowel or 'finished' after you have been to the toilet
- you develop problems being able to pee or you need to rush to the toilet to poo or pee
- your tummy starts to hurt a lot and the pain does not go away
- you have lost weight without meaning to or you have lost your appetite
- you have started to feel tired all the time
- you start being sick (vomiting) or have a high temperature
- you develop diarrhoea as well as constipation
- you notice a sudden change in how often you go to the toilet and you are aged over 60 years

Call 999 or go to A&E if you are constipated and:

- you start to be sick (vomit) violently and often
- your tummy starts to hurt a lot and it is swollen
- you start to feel confused
- you develop new pain, tingling, weakness or numbness in one or both legs

If you are worried that your condition is not getting better, or is getting worse, talk to your GP.

More information

For more information on constipation or a medicine, talk to your pharmacist or look at the following websites:
NHS 111 Wales: https://111.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/c/article/constipationinadults
Patient UK: https://patient.info/digestive-health/constipation
Medicines A-Z: https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/

The Association of UK Dietitians Food Fact Sheets on:
Fibre https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/fibre.html
Fruit and vegetables https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/fruit-and-vegetables-how-to-get-five-a-day.html
Fluid (water and drink) and hydration: https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/fluid-water-drinks.html

For constipation during pregnancy:
BUMPS – best use of medicines in pregnancy: https://www.medicinesinpregnancy.org/Medicine--pregnancy/Treating-constipation-during-pregnancy/
The Breastfeeding Network: https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/factsheet/constipation/

Information from the above resources is included in this leaflet.

Mae'r daflen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This leaflet is also available in Welsh.

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