

## ABOUT CONSTIPATION

### WHAT IS CONSTIPATION?

Constipation is defined as infrequent (fewer than three) bowel movements per week. About 80% of people experience constipation during their lifetime and brief periods of constipation is normal. Common symptoms can include:

- Decrease in amount of stool
- Need to strain to have a bowel movement (BM)
- Sense of incomplete emptying
- Need for enemas, suppositories and/or laxatives in order to maintain regularity

Any persistent change in bowel habit, such as an increase or decrease in frequency or size of stool, blood in stool, or an increased difficulty in evacuating, warrants a medical consultation.

### WHAT ARE NORMAL BOWEL HABITS?

For most people, it is normal for bowel movements to occur from 3 times per day to 3 times per week. Some people can go for a week without experiencing discomfort or harmful effects. Normal stools should be about the size, shape and consistency of a ripe banana.

### WHAT CAUSES CONSTIPATION?

Constipation may be the result of several, possibly simultaneous factors including:

- Limited fluid and fiber intake
- Imbalances in the diet (too much sugar and animal fat)
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Repeatedly ignoring the urge to have a BM
- Slow movement of the stool – too much water absorption in the colon
- Lifestyle changes, such as pregnancy and travel
- Laxative abuse

### CAN MEDICATIONS CAUSE CONSTIPATION?

Yes, constipation can be caused by medications you are taking for other conditions. Common medications include; pain medicines, antidepressants, psychiatric medications, high blood pressure medication, diuretics, iron supplements, calcium supplements, tranquilizers and antacids containing aluminum. Changes in bowel habits should always be reported to your physician. If you have a history of constipation or have recently become constipated discuss this with your physician.

## HOW DOES CONSTIPATION AFFECT THE BLADDER?

Constipation is another possible cause of bladder control problems. When the rectum is full of stool, it may disturb the bladder. Chronic constipation and/or straining can lead to excessive stress on pelvic organs and nerves. This condition also contributes to bladder dysfunction.

## HOW IS CONSTIPATION TREATED?

Most people in Western society need more fiber in their diet. Fiber supplements or other bulking agents sold at drug stores are available. Fiber supplements take **several weeks, possibly months**, to reach full effectiveness, but they are not habit forming or harmful as some laxatives can be with overuse or abuse. It is important to avoid regular use of laxatives and enemas as they decrease the ability of the bowel to function.

You should discuss your fiber needs with your physician, pharmacist or nutritionist. Typical dietary recommendations for **fiber** are between **25-35 grams per day**. Most Americans consume only 10-15 grams per day. When adding fiber to your diet it is important to remember to drink plenty of **fluids** at least **6-8 cups per day**.

Your body has a natural emptying reflex. Approximately ½ hour after eating a meal or drinking a hot beverage, a reflex occurs to increase motility or movement of the stool down to the rectum. This reflex usually occurs in the mornings when trying to get yourself or your family ready to get out the door. Try getting up earlier to eat breakfast and allow time to take advantage of this reflex.

It is also helpful to properly position yourself on the toilet to allow for maximal relaxation of your pelvic floor muscles. Be sure your feet are supported or use a stool to obtain maximal hip and knee flexion, similar to a squat position. Leaning forward and supporting your elbows on your knees is also beneficial. Pay attention to the relaxation of your pelvic floor muscles while emptying your bowels. Be sure to take time to empty your bowels. Remember the word **“rest”** in restroom. Exercising on a regular basis is also helpful to stimulate a sluggish bowel.

This recipe is commonly suggested to promote regular bowel function by increasing dietary fiber. You may experience a bloated feeling and have gas when adding fiber to your diet but this should pass within a few weeks. This may be eased by adding fiber slowly to your diet.

## RECIPE FOR BOWEL REGULARITY \*

(ASK YOUR GI MD BEFORE STARTING THIS)

Mix together:

- 1 cup applesauce
- 1 cup unprocessed wheat bran or oat bran
- 3/4 cup prune juice

Begin with 1-2 Tbs. each evening mixed with or followed by one 6-8 oz cup of water or juice. This should help to soften and regulate your bowel movements within 2 weeks. If no change occurs, slowly increase serving to 3-4 Tbs.

This may be stored in your refrigerator or your freezer. One to two tablespoon servings may be frozen in sectioned ice cube trays or in foam plastic egg cartons and thawed as needed.

\* 1 tablespoon is approximately 2 grams of fiber with wheat bran & 1 gram with oat bran.