

Acute Services Division



Information about ...

Emptying your Bowels

Pelvic Floor Physiotherapy Service

This leaflet will give you information about:

- **Constipation**
- **Obstructed Defaecation**
(Difficulty in emptying your bowels).

Normal Bowel Habits

The bowel is part of the digestive system. Its role is to:

- process the food we eat
- absorb the goodness and nutrients into our blood stream and then
- remove the waste products from the food that the body cannot use.

It is considered normal to empty your bowel between three times a day and three times per week. A bowel movement should be easy to pass. To occasionally experience some degree of urgency, straining or incomplete emptying is acceptable.

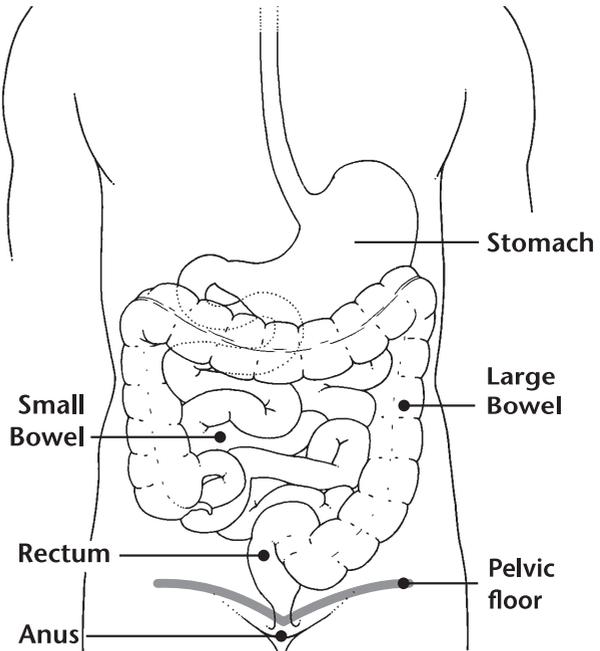


Figure 1
Over view of the
digestive system

What is Constipation?

Constipation is a common problem which can affect people of all ages. When constipated a person may experience fewer bowel movements with hard dry stool (poo) which require straining to pass. There could also be bloating, wind, abdominal pain and a sensation that you have not emptied your bowel completely.

Causes

- Diet – not eating enough fibre
- Fluids – not drinking enough fluid
- Lifestyle – lack of physical activity, stress, travel
- Hormonal Changes – pregnancy, the menopause
- Medical conditions
- Some medications can cause constipation as a side effect. (Please read your medication information leaflet or discuss this with your GP).

Diet and Fluids

Eating regular meals is important, in particular try not to skip breakfast. This helps to keep your digestive system active and therefore makes your bowel more likely to move regularly.

Fibre

There are 2 types of fibre; insoluble and soluble. Many foods contain a combination of both types.

Insoluble - fibre cannot be dissolved in water. This type of fibre acts like a sponge. It absorbs water and adds bulk to the stools.

- Fruit and vegetables with their skins and pips
- Wholegrain cereals (Wheat, Rye and Rice)
- Nuts and some pulses

Soluble - Soluble fibre does dissolve in water. It softens the stools and makes them bulkier so that they are easier to pass.

- Flesh of fruit and vegetables
- Pulses
- Oats
- Barley
- Seeds (including linseeds)

It is recommended we consume **at least 18g** of fibre per day from a combination of both types. However, if you have a slower moving bowel, insoluble fibre may cause bloating and discomfort. Increasing soluble fibre may work better for you. You can check fibre values using the nutritional information on food packaging.

If you need to increase your fibre please do this gradually to allow your bowel to adjust to the change.

Fluids

You should aim to drink 1.5 - 2 litres of fluid per day. There is no evidence to suggest that drinking more than 2 litres per day will improve symptoms of constipation.

Lifestyle

It is important to make time to empty your bowel. Eating often stimulates bowel activity and 30 minutes after a meal is the time that your bowel is most likely to work.

You should not ignore the urge to empty your bowel, even if you are busy or not keen to use public toilets.

Do not strain excessively. If nothing has happened within 10 minutes, return to the toilet when you next get the urge.

Regular physical activity (e.g. walking) can stimulate the digestive system, making you less likely to suffer from constipation.

Try to recognise situations that cause you stress and make time for relaxation.

All of these suggestions may help to improve your symptoms.

Laxatives

For most people diet and lifestyle changes will be all that they need to solve their constipation. If this doesn't help then your GP may prescribe you a laxative.

Laxatives are a type of medicine that encourage bowel movement and help you to empty your bowel more easily. There are several types and each one has a different effect on your digestive system. Your GP will advise you on how long to take your laxative.

Obstructed Defaecation (Difficulty Emptying Your Bowel)

This is when some people may have a problem passing their bowel motion.

- This difficulty can be caused by your pelvic floor muscles tightening rather than relaxing which stops your stool from passing easily.
- Occasionally the walls of the rectum fold in on themselves and this can make it more difficult for you to empty your bowel.
- In women, the rectum may bulge forward, pushing against the back wall of the vagina causing stool to become trapped in the bulge (Figure 2).

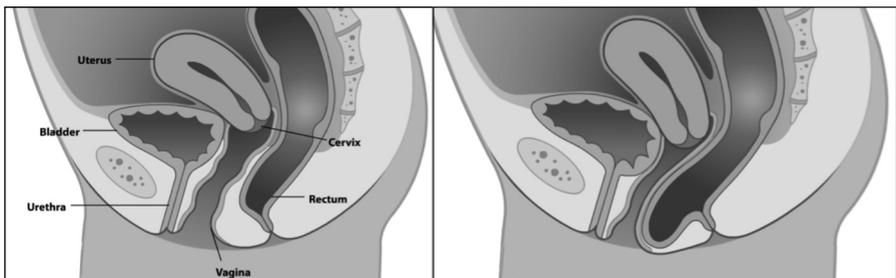


Figure 2

Bowel Emptying Technique

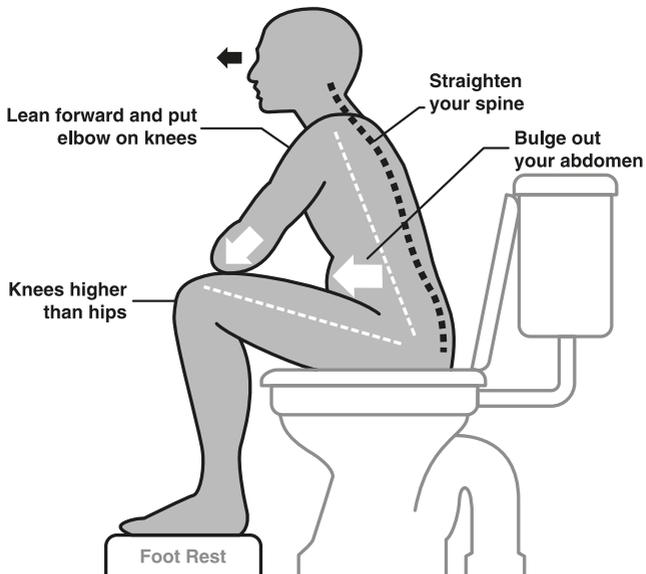


Figure 3. The correct position to move your bowels

Sitting correctly on the toilet and using this technique can help you empty your bowel more easily. Lean forward on the toilet with your forearms resting on your thighs, your legs more than hip width apart and your feet raised up on a small foot stool.

- Relax and breathe normally – do not hold your breath
- Widen your waist by bracing your abdominal muscles outwards
- Relax your back passage
- Push from your waist backwards and downwards into your back passage
- Use your abdominal muscles as a pump to push gently and firmly towards the back passage – **do not strain**

Repeat for up to 10 minutes only or until your bowel has emptied. If you don't pass anything try again when you have another urge to go or the following day.

If you have any of the following symptoms, please see your GP. All of these symptoms can be caused by several conditions however you should inform your GP.

- Bleeding from your back passage (rectum) or blood in your stool
- A change in your normal bowel habit lasting three or more weeks
- A lump and or pain in your abdomen or rectum
- Unexplained weight loss
- Extreme tiredness for no obvious reason
- Unexplained breathlessness

Constipation Information	patient.info/pdf/4226.pdf	
Bladder and Bowel Community	www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org/	
Healthy Eating Advice	www.food.gov.uk/	
	www.nhs.uk/Livewell/healthy-eating/Pages/Healthyeating.aspx	