

# Constipation








## What Is Constipation?

Constipation occurs when **bowel movements** become difficult or less frequent. The normal length of time between **bowel movements** ranges widely from person to person. Some people have bowel movements three times a day; others, only one or two times a week. Going longer than three days without a bowel movement is too long. After three days, the stool or feces become harder and more difficult to pass.

You are considered constipated if you have two or more of the following for at least 3 months:

- Straining during a bowel movement more than 25% of the time
- Hard stools more than 25% of the time
- Incomplete evacuation more than 25% of the time
- Two or fewer bowel movements in a week

### Bristol Stool Chart

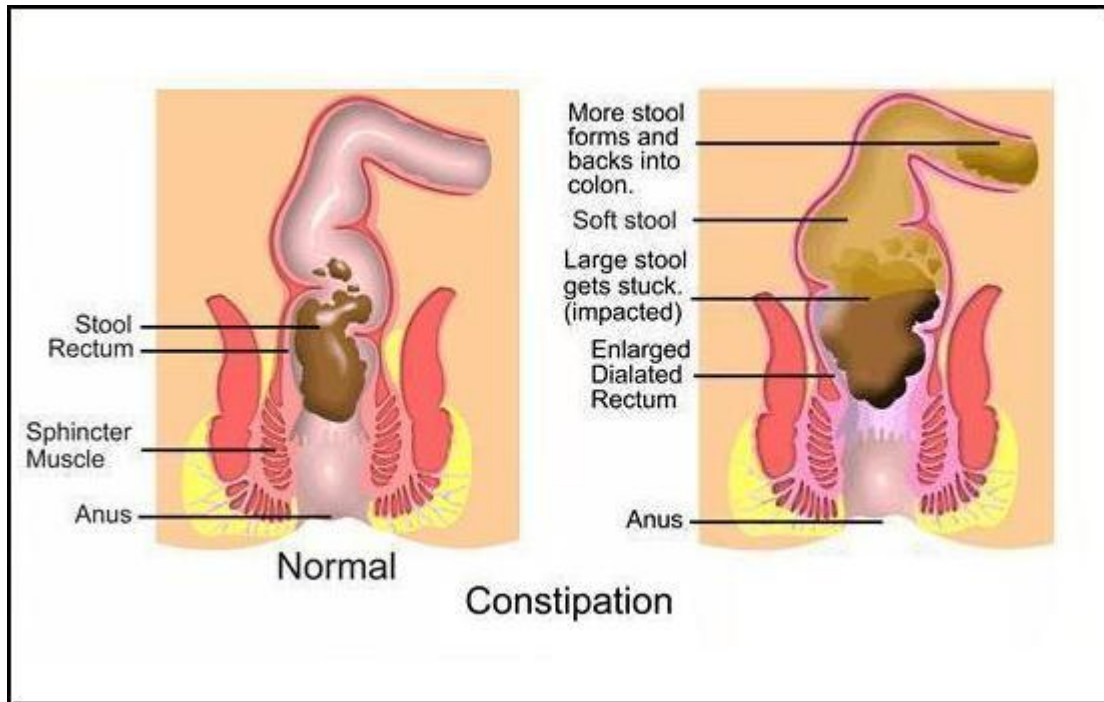
Type 1		Separate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass)
Type 2		Sausage-shaped but lumpy
Type 3		Like a sausage but with cracks on its surface
Type 4		Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft
Type 5		Soft blobs with clear-cut edges (passed easily)
Type 6		Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool
Type 7		Watery, no solid pieces. <b>Entirely Liquid</b>

## What Causes Constipation?

Constipation is usually caused by a disorder of bowel function rather than a structural problem. Common causes of constipation include:

- Inadequate water intake
- Inadequate fiber in the diet
- A disruption of regular diet or routine; traveling
- Inadequate activity or [exercise](#) or immobility
- Eating large amounts of dairy products
- Stress
- Resisting the urge to have a bowel movement, which is sometimes the result of pain from [hemorrhoids](#)
- Overuse of [laxatives](#) (stimulant laxatives such as [senna \(Senokot\)](#)) which, over time, weaken the bowel muscles
- [Hypothyroidism](#)
- Neurological conditions such as [Parkinson's disease](#) or [multiple sclerosis](#)
- Antacid medicines containing [calcium](#) or aluminum
- Medicines (especially strong pain medicines, such as narcotics, [antidepressants](#), or iron pills)
- [Depression](#)
- [Eating disorders](#)
- [Irritable bowel syndrome](#)
- [Pregnancy](#)
- [Colon cancer](#)

In some cases, lack of good nerve and muscle function in the bowel may also be a cause of constipation.



## What are the Symptoms of Constipation?

Symptoms of constipation can include:

- Infrequent bowel movements or difficulty having bowel movements (straining)
- Hard or small stools
- Sense of incomplete bowel movement
- Swollen [abdomen](#) or [abdominal pain](#)
- Pain
- [Vomiting](#)

There may also be occasional [diarrhea](#) resulting from hard stool obstructing the [colon](#).

How Is Constipation Diagnosed?

Most people do not need extensive testing to diagnose constipation. Only a small number of patients with constipation have a more serious medical problem. If you have constipation for more than two weeks, you should see a doctor so he or she can determine the source of your problem and treat it. If constipation is caused by [colon cancer](#), early detection and treatment is very important.

Tests your doctor may perform to diagnose the cause of your constipation include:

- [Blood](#) tests if a hormonal imbalance is suspected
- [Barium studies](#) to look for obstruction of the colon

- [Colonoscopy](#) to look for obstruction of the colon

The vast majority of patients with constipation do not have any obvious illness to explain their symptoms and suffer from one of two problems:

- **Colonic inertia.** A condition in which the colon contracts poorly and retains stool
- **Obstructed defecation.** A condition in which the person excessively strains to expel stool from the rectum

## How Can I Prevent Constipation?

There are several things you can do to [prevent constipation](#). Among them:

- Eat a well-[balanced diet](#) with plenty of fiber. Good sources of fiber are fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole-grain bread and cereal (especially bran). Fiber and water help the colon pass stool.
- Drink 1 1/2 to 2 quarts of water and other fluids a day (unless fluid restricted for another medical condition). Liquids that contain [caffeine](#), such as coffee and soft drinks, seem to have a dehydrating effect and may need to be avoided until your bowel habits return to normal. Some people may need to avoid milk, as dairy products may be constipating for them.
- [Exercise](#) regularly.
- Move your bowels when you feel the urge.

### What Should I Do If I Am Constipated?

If you are constipated, try the following:

- Drink two to four extra glasses of water a day (unless fluid restricted).
- Try warm liquids, especially in the morning.
- Add [fruits and vegetables](#) to your diet.
- Eat prunes and/or bran cereal.
- If needed, use a very mild [stool softener](#) or laxative (such as Peri-[Colace](#) or [Milk of Magnesia](#)). Do not use laxatives for more than two weeks without calling your doctor, as laxative overuse can aggravate your symptoms.

**Call your doctor if:**

- Constipation is a new problem for you
- You have **blood** in your stool
- You are losing weight even though you are not **dieting**
- You have severe pain with bowel movements
- Your constipation has lasted more than two weeks