

Managing Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation is when it's hard to have bowel movements (stools). Your bowel movements may be:

- hard and dry
- difficult or painful to get out
- happening less than 3 times per week

Some people have a bowel movement more often than others. Having fewer bowel movements doesn't mean you are constipated if they follow a regular pattern and the stools are soft and easy to pass.

What causes constipation?

Possible causes of constipation include:

- a low fibre diet
- not drinking enough fluid
- not getting enough activity every day
- ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- stress or depression
- pregnancy hormones
- certain medical conditions
- side effects from some medications or supplements

How do I prevent constipation?

Eat enough fibre everyday

Fibre is the part of plant foods that our bodies cannot fully digest. Fibre can help prevent constipation by making stools bulky, soft, and easier to pass.

How much fibre do I need?

Age or group	Men (grams per day)	Women (grams per day)
19–50 years	38	25
Over 50 years	30	21
Pregnant or breastfeeding	–	28–29

What foods have fibre?

Vegetables and Fruit

- all vegetables and fruit, especially with skins and seeds



Grain Products

- breads, cereals, noodles, pasta, and other grain products made with whole grains
- all types of barley, bran, brown rice, buckwheat, bulgur, cracked wheat, quinoa, and oats



Meat Alternatives

- beans, chickpeas, lentils, and split peas
- nuts and seeds such as almonds, chia, flax, hemp seeds, peanuts, sunflower seeds, and walnuts



Note: During pregnancy, you can eat ground flaxseed once in a while, but not every day. Not enough is known about its safety in pregnancy.

Tips for increasing your fibre intake:

- Include foods with fibre at meals and snacks.
- Eat 7–10 servings of vegetables and fruit each day. One serving is:
 - ½ cup (125 mL) fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables
 - ½ cup (125 mL) cooked or 1 cup (250 mL) raw leafy vegetables
 - 1 piece or ½ cup (125 mL) fresh, frozen, or canned fruit or ¼ cup (60 mL) dried fruit
- Add 1–2 tablespoons (15–30 mL) of wheat bran or ground flax seeds to other foods.
- Enjoy a ¼ cup (60 mL) serving of nuts and seeds.
- Eat beans, chickpeas, or lentils regularly. One serving is ¾ cup (175 mL).
- Foods with fibre can be added to casseroles, cereals, pasta sauces, salads, smoothies, yogurt, soups, stews, and baked items.



- Prunes are a natural laxative. Eat 2–3 prunes or drink ½ cup (125 mL) prune juice to help manage constipation as needed.
- Your bowels need time to get used to higher fibre foods. Increase your fibre intake slowly and spread fibre-rich foods throughout the day. This will help prevent gas and bloating.
- The **Nutrition Facts table** on food labels shows the amount of fibre and the % Daily Value (% DV) for fibre. Read the table and choose foods with more fibre.



Serving size →

Nutrition Facts	
Per 250 mL (34 g)	
Amount	% Daily Value
Calories 120	
Fat 0.5 g	2 %
Saturated 0 g Trans 0 g	1 %
Cholesterol 0 mg	
Sodium 210 mg	10 %
Carbohydrate 28 g	9 %
Fibre 5 g	20 %
Sugars 5 g	
Protein 4 g	
Vitamin A	0 %
Calcium	0 %
Iron	30 %

Choose 2 g or more fibre per serving →

Choose a higher % Daily Value for fibre ←

Drink enough fluid everyday

It's important to drink enough fluid when you eat a higher fibre diet to help stools stay soft. The table below shows how much fluid is recommended for adults every day.

Age or group	Men	Women
19 years and over	12 cups (3 litres)	9 cups (2.2 litres)
Pregnant	—	10 cups (2.5 litres)
Breastfeeding	—	12 cups (3 litres)

Tips to increase your fluid intake:

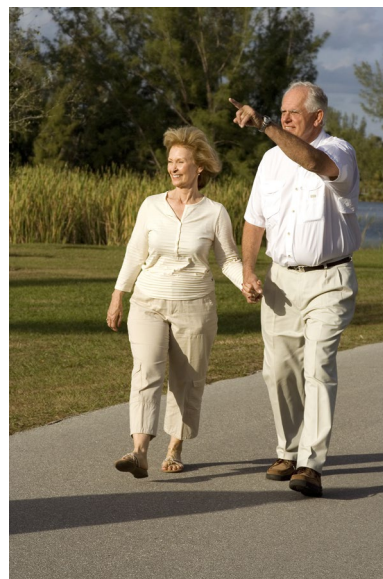
- Get most of your fluid by drinking water.
- Other fluids include milk, juice, coffee, tea, broth, and soup.
- Fruit juice is low in fibre compared to whole fruit, so limit 100% juice to no more than ½ cup (125 mL) per day.



Be active everyday

Daily activity is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. It helps keep your bowels moving regularly. Be active for at least 30 minutes each day, 5–7 days a week.

- You can start with 10 minutes at a time and gradually increase the time you spend.
- Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each week. This type of activity makes your heart beat faster.
- Limiting the time you spend in front of the TV or computer may help you be more active.



For more information on [physical activity](#), go to www.publichealth.gc.ca. Search for *Physical Activity-Healthy Living*.

What about laxatives?

Laxatives are fibre supplements, pills, or liquids that can help when you are constipated. These may help you if constipation doesn't get better on a higher fibre diet or if you can't get enough fibre from food. Follow the instructions on the package or those given by your healthcare provider if you use a laxative.

Compared to other laxatives, fibre supplements are safer for adults to use long term. Common fibre supplements are:

- inulin
- methylcellulose
- psyllium
- wheat bran

Fibre supplements can cause gas, cramps, and bloating and need enough fluid to make them work properly. Drink the amount of fluid recommended on the package.

It's best not to use herbal laxatives as the safety of these for constipation is not known.

Laxatives shouldn't be used for too long, as they can cause the bowel muscles to stop working properly. This can make constipation worse.

Note: Pregnant women should talk with their healthcare provider before taking laxative medicine or fibre supplements to manage constipation.

Other ideas to help manage constipation

- Try to have a bowel movement when you feel the urge. If you ignore this feeling the stool can become hard and dry, making it more difficult to pass.
- The bowels are most active after eating, so eating small meals and snacks throughout the day may help you have a bowel movement more often.
- Write down your food and fluid intake, your activity level, and your bowel pattern. This may help you find out what's causing the constipation.



What about probiotics?

Probiotics are bacteria and yeast that may help balance the bacteria in the bowel to keep it healthy.

There are many different types and strains of probiotics that work in different ways, but more research is needed in this area.

Good food sources of probiotics include *live-culture* yogurt, kefir and yogurt drinks.



When to talk to your doctor about constipation

Constipation can be a symptom of other health conditions. It can also be caused by some kinds of medicine. Talk to your doctor if:

- your bowel symptoms are new or not normal for you
- the problem comes and goes, but lasts for longer than 3 weeks
- your constipation doesn't get better after a few weeks of eating more fibre and drinking enough fluid
- you're using laxatives often
- you have alternating constipation and diarrhea
- there is blood in the toilet or on the toilet paper after having a bowel movement
- you have bloating, a fever, stomach pain, or vomiting
- you have less appetite or unexplained weight loss

For more information:

See [Steps to a Healthier You](#) at www.healthyeatingstartshere.ca for more information on fibre, fluid, and healthy eating.

Look for:

- [Choose Whole Grains](#)
- [Choose Healthy Drinks](#)
- [Eat More Vegetables and Fruit](#)