



Bowel Management Techniques

To be in good health, everyone needs a good “bowel routine.”

But once in a while, it's common for a person to pass bowel movements (stool) too often. This is called diarrhea. And it's common to not pass stool often enough. This is called constipation.

Usually, these conditions only last for a short time. Sometimes, diarrhea and constipation can last a while. You can help avoid these conditions — and treat them when they happen — by having a good routine of diet and exercise. When needed, it may be helpful to change your activity (behavior) when you are trying to pass stool. And if those efforts don't work well, a supplement or medication may help. This information shares some ideas to help you have a good bowel routine.

What's normal?

There is no “normal” number of bowel movements per day or week. A normal bowel routine is different for every person. “Normal” may vary from three movements a day to once every three days.

How your bowel works

Your colon stores and removes waste that your body can't digest. When your body is ready to pass a bowel movement, the muscles of your colon get a signal and contract or tighten. These contractions push waste from your colon down into your rectum.

There are several ways that the colon receives signals naturally. When the colon gets too many signals, it could lead to diarrhea. When it gets too few signals, it could lead to constipation. And sometimes a person doesn't or can't react to the signals that are sent.

If you feel constipated

If you feel constipated, you can try to increase the number of signals that go to your colon. For example:

- Eat a meal. The larger the meal, the more signals that happen.
- Drink some warm or hot liquid.
- Drink a beverage with caffeine.
- Exercise.

What can you do?

Always pay attention to your body. Go to the bathroom when you feel like you need to pass a bowel movement. If you delay going to the bathroom, more water will be absorbed from your stool. That makes your stool harder. A hard stool is more difficult to pass. And it can be more painful when it does pass.

Here are some other specific ideas to help you have a good bowel routine.

Change your diet

- ☐ **Increase your fiber intake.** Fiber foods and fiber supplements absorb intestinal liquid, which makes hard stools softer and easier to pass. If you have diarrhea, fiber also can decrease stool frequency by binding liquid or loose stool into a solid consistency. To add more fiber to your daily diet, try to eat more fruit and vegetables. Be sure you're eating whole grains when you eat bread.

The American Dietetic Association recommends a daily fiber intake for adults of 20 to 35 grams. The amount of fiber you need may vary. Talk to your health care provider about this if needed.

It may be difficult to get enough fiber by diet alone, so a fiber supplement may be helpful. Talk to your health care provider about the type and amount of fiber you should use.

If you do increase your fiber intake, do it slowly, over time. Adding fiber too quickly can give you abdominal gas, bloating and cramping. It takes most people 2 to 4 weeks for the colon to adjust to an increase in fiber.

- ☐ **Eat breakfast.** A breakfast high in fiber is a great way to help you pass a bowel movement shortly after the meal. Consistently eating breakfast may help you achieve a more regular pattern for your bowel movements. For breakfast, try these items:
 - A serving of bran or other high-fiber cereal
 - Whole-grain toast
 - Prunes or prune juice
 - A cup of coffee, tea or other warm beverage. Caffeine and hot drinks stimulate the bowels.
- ☐ **Drink 5 to 8 glasses (about 64 oz.) of fluid per day.** Try to limit this to water, juice, milk, soup, tea, or other fluids. Avoid large quantities of carbonated and caffeinated beverages. Too much caffeine can cause dehydration, leading to harder stools and possibly constipation.

If you have loose stool or diarrhea symptoms

If you have loose stool or diarrhea symptoms, avoid large meals, hot liquids and caffeine. Eating smaller meals more often during the day should stimulate your bowel less.

Exercise

- ☐ Get some light physical activity for about 30 to 60 minutes a day. Walking, cycling and swimming are good options. Exercise usually helps a person's bowels work well.
- ☐ Work to strengthen your abdominal muscles. Strong abdominal muscles help bowels work well. A physical therapist can help you create an exercise program for you if needed.

Change some of your “bathroom behaviors”

- ☐ Time your trip to the bathroom well. For example, plan to go to the bathroom about 5 to 10 minutes after a large meal. This is usually a good time to pass a bowel movement.
- ☐ Relax. Allow yourself 5 to 10 minutes on the toilet. Take in a book or newspaper to read. **If you haven't passed stool within 10 minutes, stop trying.** Try again when the urge returns.
- ☐ Think about how you sit on the toilet. Your body position matters.
 - Keep your back and pelvis straight. Keep your feet on the floor or raised a bit on a stool.
 - Avoid holding your breath. Use deep abdominal breathing to help you relax so you can empty your bowel.
 - Relax your pelvic floor muscles as you breathe in deeply. Slowly exhale. Sometimes making a loud sound, such as “TSSSSSS,” helps when you need to pass stool.
 - Don't strain too much. Straining a lot can lead to temporary congestion of the rectal veins. That could cause the rectum to narrow. This makes it harder to move your bowel. **If you feel like you have to strain, stop trying.** Try again when the urge returns.

Try a fiber supplement or medication

Some people need to try a fiber supplement or medication. There are many products available.



Talk to your health care provider. Only take the supplement or medication that your provider tells you to try. If the first medication doesn't work, contact your health care provider again. You may need to try different products before you find one that works well for you. Some of the medications listed here are available without a prescription. Others require a prescription.

Fiber supplements

Fiber supplements, such as Metamucil™, Citrucel™ and FiberCon™, come in many different forms: powder, liquid, chewable tablets, capsules, coated tablets, and wafers. You may need to take fiber supplements for 1 to 2 weeks to get maximum benefit.

Use _____ at a dose of _____. Mix with _____ ounces (oz.) of water in a _____-oz. cup. Follow each dose with _____ oz. of additional water. Take this each (circle one) morning/noon/ supper/bedtime. Over time, increase the dose to _____.

Note:

- Do not take fiber at the same time you take other medications. Other medications may be less effective if taken at the same time you take fiber.
- Fiber supplements can cause your stomach to feel bloated, like it's full of air or bubbles. This is also called "distention." The feeling goes away quickly after you move your bowels.

Stool softeners

Stool softeners, such as Colace™ and Surfak™, may help you if you have hard stools or a difficult time passing stools. It is also used by people who are not able to drink enough liquid during the day. Lack of water can lead to hard stools.

Try this stool softener at bedtime: _____.

Laxatives

There are many types of laxatives, including those listed here. **Note:** Using a laxative for too many days may lead you to be dependent on them.

☐ Milk of Magnesia™: _____.

If this gives you diarrhea, decrease the dose you take by half.

☐ Bisacodyl: _____.

☐ Polyethylene glycol (for example, Miralax™): _____.

If this gives you diarrhea, decrease the dose you take by half.

☐ Other: _____.

☐ Other: _____.

Antidiarrheal medications

☐ Loperamide (for example, Imodium™): _____.

Suppositories

Suppositories may work best if used after breakfast so that the effects of the meal are combined with those of the medication. Two options are:

- ☐ Glycerin: _____
- ☐ Bisacodyl: _____

Enemas

Enemas may be helpful for a few reasons: if there is a need to help empty your bowels; if there is concern that your rectum has become impacted with stool; or if you want to empty your rectum completely to prevent leaking or incontinence.

Examples of enemas include:

Sodium phosphates enema: _____

Tap-water enema: _____

Mineral-oil retention enema: _____

Combination enemas: _____

For more information

If you have questions after you read this information, talk to your health care provider.

Notes

Notes

This material is for your education and information only. This content does not replace medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. New medical research may change this information. If you have questions about a medical condition, always talk with your health care provider.

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