



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: CONSTIPATION

The Student Health Provider has treated you for constipation.

Constipation consists of a change from *your* usual pattern, with stools becoming less frequent and more difficult to pass. There is no set number of bowel movements a person should have each day or week. People vary widely in frequency of bowel movements, from three times a day to three times a week.

Most everyone experiences constipation sometime in his/her life. Certain medicines, such as prescription pain pills, calcium antacids, calcium supplements, antihistamines, diet pills, calcium channel blockers, and diuretics (fluid pills) can cause constipation. Other factors which increase constipation include age, pregnancy, chronic laxative abuse, and a diet low in fiber.

Americans, in general, consume a low fiber diet. Fiber acts as a *natural* laxative: Fiber draws water into the stool and increases the bulk of stools, resulting in softer stools and more rapid movement of stools through the intestine.

Fiber in the diet not only minimizes constipation; fiber may prevent diverticulitis, hemorrhoids, intestinal polyps, and even cancer of the bowel. A high fiber diet is also helpful in weight control/reduction.

MEASURES WHICH YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT AND PREVENT CONSTIPATION:

1. Drink plenty of fluids every day. Four to six glasses of water or other non-alcoholic beverage help keep stools soft.
2. Exercise daily. Even mild exercise like walking improves bowel function.
3. Consume a diet high in fiber. Fruits, vegetables, whole wheat bread, oatmeal, and bran cereal are all high in fiber.
4. Stool softeners consisting of natural vegetable fiber substances are safe and effective. Look for over-the-counter preparations containing psyllium or methylcellulose. Natural stool softeners work like fiber, increasing bulk of the stools. Realize that these preparations are not “instant” laxatives: They take one-half to three days to soften the stool. Be sure to drink plenty of water when using natural stool softeners.
5. An *occasional* laxative can be used. The safest preparations are bisacodyl (by mouth or suppository) or even Milk of Magnesia. *Do not* take a laxative if abdominal pain, nausea, or vomiting are present — you may worsen your condition. Also, regular use of laxatives can lead to poor bowel function and alteration of internal body elements (sodium, potassium, etc.)
6. If constipation persists, see a medical provider in follow-up as recommended. See a doctor for constipation if it is accompanied by weight loss or blood in the stool. Other causes of constipation can be investigated and treated if present.
7. If your condition changes or worsens, return to the Student Health Center or see your personal/referral doctor *promptly*. Specifically, seek care if you develop significant abdominal pain, vomiting, or fever.