AGA Patient Education Section

Constipation

What is constipation? Constipation involves any of the following symptoms:

- You have infrequent (<3 times/wk) bowel movements.
- You have hard-to-pass bowel movements (meaning they are painful or you have to strain).
- You have very hard stools.
- You feel as if your bowel movements are incomplete.

What Causes Constipation?

Constipation is usually a symptom, not a disease. Some of the most common causes of constipation are as follows:

- Poor diet
  - Not eating enough fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can make stools hard to pass.
  - Changes in your diet, such as when you travel, can lead to constipation.
  - Lack of physical activity in addition to poor diet also can make you constipated.
- Medication
  - Many medications can cause constipation, so you should let your doctor know all the medicines you take.
- Irritable bowel syndrome
  - Constipation-predominant irritable bowel syndrome can cause constipation.
  - It usually comes with more belly pain.
- Poor bowel habits
  - This means not going when you have the urge to move your bowels.
- Pelvic floor dysfunction
  - This is when the muscles in the pelvic floor do not relax to allow passage of stool.

When to Call Your Doctor

Constipation is a normal issue that most people have at some point. Sometimes, however, it does not go away. You should talk to your doctor if:

- Your symptoms are really bad or disabling, and/or last longer than 3 weeks.
- You have bad stomach pain when you pass stool.
- Your stools are consistently thinner.
- You have blood in your stool (or on the toilet paper) that does not go away or comes back often.
- You have anemia.
- You start losing weight without trying to (along with other symptoms).

Getting Tested

If your doctor decides your constipation is bad enough, there are a few tests that can be performed. Beyond taking samples of stool, urine, and blood, a doctor may perform other tests to find out the cause. Some common tests are as follows: a radiograph to see if there is a large amount of stool inside your bowels, and a lower gastrointestinal endoscopy, for example, a colonoscopy.

Treatment

Normal bowel habits vary based on the individual, so it is important to figure out what is normal for you so that you notice a major change in bowel habits.

There are several ways you can help regulate your bowel habits, such as keeping a diet with fresh fruits, vegetables, and a lot of water, along with regular exercise. There are also some over-the-counter options to help treat constipation.

- Bulking agents (fiber), to pull fluid into the intestines to make bigger stool, causing the colon to contract and push it out.
- Osmotic agents, to help keep fluid in the stool, to make it softer, and increase the number of bowel movements.
- Stool softeners also bring fluids into stool to soften them.
- Lubricants coat the outside of the stool, helping it pass more easily.
- Stimulant laxatives make the intestines contract and move stool along.

If over-the-counter options do not help, your doctor may discuss prescription medicines, biofeedback treatment (for pelvic floor dysfunction), or surgery.

For more information on constipation, talk to your doctor and visit www.gastro.org/patient-care/conditions-diseases/constipation.