

## 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

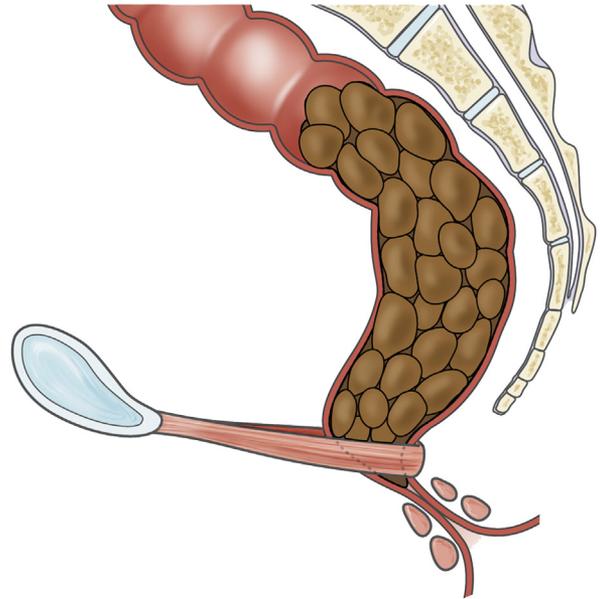
Constipation is a normal issue that most people have at some point. Sometimes, however, it does not go away. You should talk to your doctor if:

- 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

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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](http://www.gastro.org/patient-care/conditions-diseases/constipation).*