

Constipation

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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- If your medication(s) is causing constipation, ask your primary health care provider about taking a stool softener regularly.

Call your primary health care provider or your pharmacist if you are constipated for longer than 2 or 3 weeks, or you are constipated and:

- › You start vomiting (throwing up)
- › You have signs of infection, like a fever (temperature above 38 °C or 100.4 °F) or chills
- › You have abdominal (stomach area) pain
- › Your abdomen (stomach area) is swollen or bloated
- › You are losing weight without trying

If you cannot reach your primary health care provider or another health care provider, go to a walk-in clinic or to the nearest Emergency Department right away.

Constipation

- Constipation is when you do not have bowel movements (poops) very often, or they are hard to pass. This is also called **being constipated**.
- You are considered to be constipated if you do not have bowel movements as often as **usual**. This is different for everyone. Some people usually have 1 bowel movement a day, while others have 2 to 3 a day or only 3 to 4 a week (7 days).
- It is common to be constipated once in a while. This is not a reason to worry. If you are constipated often, see your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner).

What causes constipation?

- Constipation can be caused by:
 - › Not eating enough fibre (the part of a plant that your body cannot break down)
 - › Not drinking enough fluids
 - › Ignoring the feeling that you need to have a bowel movement
 - › Using laxatives (medications to help you poop) often

- › Medications (like opioid pain medications, iron supplements, some antacids)
- › Not exercising enough
- › Putting off having a bowel movement to avoid pain (for example, because of hemorrhoids)
- › Being pregnant

What can help with constipation?

- **Do not ignore the feeling that you need to have a bowel movement.** The longer stool (poop) is in your bowel, the more water it loses. This makes the stool harder, and makes it harder to pass.
- **Eat breakfast every day.** Eating 3 healthy meals a day helps your bowel to work well.
- **Eat more fibre.** Foods with lots of fibre include whole grain products, fruits, vegetables, and pulses (beans, peas, lentils, chickpeas).
- **Eat prunes and other fruits that start with “p”** (like prunes, pears, peaches, plums).
- **Eat prebiotic foods** (like garlic, onions, bananas) **and probiotic foods** (like yogurt, kefir, miso, kimchi, pickles). You can also take probiotic supplements. Prebiotic and probiotic foods help support the good bacteria in your digestive tract (gut).

- **Drink more water.** Sparkling water may work better than still water because it is carbonated (bubbly). Drink at least 6 large glasses of water a day.
- **Drink coffee, especially caffeinated.** Coffee helps move the muscles in the digestive system.
- **Exercise regularly.** Exercise helps the intestines work, which leads to more regular bowel movements. Remember to drink lots of water to replace any water lost from sweating.
- **Take a fibre supplement.** A non-fermentable (will not break down) soluble fibre (like psyllium) is best.
- **Take senna (a herbal laxative).** Senna can excite the nerves in your gut to help speed up bowel movements. **Do not** take senna for longer than 2 weeks (14 days).
- **Take an over-the-counter or prescription laxative.** Talk with your pharmacist or your primary health care provider about what is right for you.
- **Take a magnesium citrate supplement.** This is a laxative that softens stool, making it easier to pass. **Do not take magnesium citrate for longer than 1 week, unless your primary health care provider says it is OK.**