



Patient & Family Guide  
2019

# Constipation

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*Constipation* (FF85-2080)



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# Constipation

Constipation is when you don't have bowel movements (poops) very often, or they are hard to pass. We also call this "being constipated."

You are only considered constipated if you're not having bowel movements as often as you **usually** do. How the bowels work is different for everyone. Some people usually have one bowel movement a day, while some have 2-3 a day or only 3-4 a week.

Constipation every once in a while is common and is not a reason to worry. If you are constipated often, see your family health care provider.

## What causes constipation?

Constipation can be caused by:

- › not eating enough fibre
- › not drinking enough fluids
- › ignoring the feeling that you need to go to the bathroom
- › using laxatives often
- › medication(s)
- › not enough exercise
- › putting off going to the bathroom to avoid pain (e.g., because of hemorrhoids)

## 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 more difficult to pass.
- **Drink more water.** Sparkling water may work better than still water because it is carbonated (bubbly). Drink at least 6 large glasses of water each day.
- **Drink coffee, especially caffeinated.** Coffee helps move the muscles in the digestive system.
- **Eat more fibre.** Fibre is the part of a plant that your body can't digest. Whole grain products, fruits, vegetables, and pulses (e.g., lentils, chickpeas) have lots of fibre.
- **Take a fibre supplement.** The best choice for a fibre supplement is a non-fermentable soluble fibre, such as psyllium.
- **Eat prebiotic foods** like garlic, onions, and bananas. **Eat probiotic foods** like yogurt, kefir, miso, kimchi, and pickles. You can also take probiotic supplements. Prebiotic and probiotic foods help support the 'good' bacteria in your digestive tract (gut).

- **Eat breakfast every day.** Eating 3 healthy meals a day helps your bowel to work well.
- **Exercise regularly.** Exercise helps to make the intestines work, which leads to more regular bowel movements. Remember to drink lots of water to replace any water lost from sweating.
- **Take senna (an herbal laxative).** Senna can excite the nerves in your gut to speed up bowel movements. Don't take senna for longer than 2 weeks.
- **Take an over-the-counter or prescription laxative.**
- **Take a magnesium citrate supplement.** This is a laxative that softens stool, making it easier to pass. **Don't take magnesium citrate for longer than 1 week, unless your family health care provider told you it's OK.**
- **Eat prunes.** Keep the "p" fruits in mind, such as pears, peaches, and plums.

**What are your questions? Please ask.  
We are here to help you.**

**In Nova Scotia you can call 811 to talk with  
a registered nurse about your health care  
questions 24/7.**

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

**Call your family health care provider if you continue to be constipated and:**

- › you start vomiting (throwing up)
- › you are having abdominal (stomach) pain
- › your abdomen (stomach area) is swollen or bloated

**If you have the symptoms listed above and you cannot reach your family health care provider or another health care provider on call, go to a walk-in clinic or to the nearest Emergency Department.**



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Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

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

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

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*Please do not use perfumed products. Thank you!*

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The information is not intended to be and does not constitute health care or medical advice.

If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.