

Managing Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation is when it's hard to poop (have bowel movements). Your poop may be:

- hard and dry
- difficult or painful to pass
- happening less than 3 times per week

Some people poop more often than others. Pooping less often doesn't mean you are constipated if you follow a regular pattern and your poop is soft and easy to pass.

What causes constipation?

Possible causes of constipation include:

- a low fibre diet
- not drinking enough fluid
- not getting enough activity every day
- ignoring the urge to poop
- stress or depression
- hormones in pregnancy and menopause
- certain medical conditions
- side effects from some medications or supplements

How do I prevent constipation?

Eat enough fibre everyday

Fibre is the part of plant foods that our bodies cannot fully digest. Fibre can help prevent constipation by making poop soft and easier to pass.

How much fibre do I need?

Age or group	Male (grams per day)	Female (grams per day)
19–50 years	38	25
Over 50 years	30	21
Pregnant or lactating	–	28–29

What foods have fibre?

Vegetables and fruits

- all vegetables and fruits, especially those with skins and seeds

Whole grain foods

- breads, cereals, pasta, and other grain products made with whole grains
- all types of barley, bran, brown rice, buckwheat, bulgur, cracked wheat, quinoa, and oats

Protein foods

- beans, chickpeas, lentils, and split peas
- nuts and seeds such as almonds, chia seeds, flaxseed, hemp hearts, peanuts, sunflower seeds, and walnuts



Note during pregnancy: It is safe to eat up to 1 Tbsp (15 mL) flaxseed daily. It is best to **avoid flaxseed oil** as not much is known about the impacts on the baby.

Tips for increasing your fibre intake:

- Include foods with fibre at meals and snacks.
- Eat plenty of vegetables and fruits each day. Fill ½ your plate with vegetables and fruits at each meal.
- Add 1–2 tablespoons (15–30 mL) of wheat bran or ground flaxseeds to other foods.
- Enjoy unsalted nuts and seeds in small amounts.
- Eat beans, chickpeas, or lentils regularly. One serving is ¾ cup (175 mL).
- Foods with fibre can be added to casseroles, cereals, pasta sauces, salads, smoothies, yogurt, soups, stews, and baked items.
- Prunes are a natural laxative. Eat 2–3 prunes to help manage constipation as needed.
- Your body needs time to get used to higher fibre foods. Increase your fibre intake slowly and spread fibre-rich foods throughout the day. This will help prevent gas and bloating.

Read food labels and choose foods with more fibre

The **Nutrition Facts table** on food labels shows the amount of fibre and the % Daily Value (% DV) for fibre. Read the table and choose foods with more fibre.

Serving size →		Nutrition Facts	
		Per 250 mL (34 g)	
		Amount	% Daily Value
		Calories 120	
		Fat 0.5 g	2 %
		Saturated 0 g Trans 0 g	1 %
		Cholesterol 0 mg	
		Sodium 210 mg	10 %
		Carbohydrate 28 g	9 %
Choose 2 g or more →	Choose a higher % Daily Value for fibre ←	Fibre 5 g	20 %
		Sugars 5 g	
		Protein 4 g	
		Vitamin A	0 %
		Calcium	0 %
		Iron	30 %

Drink enough fluid daily

It's important to drink enough when you eat a higher fibre diet to help your poop stay soft.

The table below shows how much fluid is recommended for adults every day.

Age or group	Male	Female
19 years and over	12 cups (3 L)	9 cups (2.2 L)
Pregnancy	—	10 cups (2.5 L)
Lactating	—	12 cups (3 L)

Tips to increase your fluid intake

- Get most of your fluid by drinking water.
- Other fluids include milk, coffee, tea, broth, and soup.



Be active everyday

Daily activity is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. It helps you to poop regularly.

Be active for at least 30 minutes each day, 5–7 days each week.

- You can start with 10 minutes at a time and gradually increase the time you spend.
- Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each week. This type of activity makes your heart beat faster.
- Limiting the time you spend in front of your phone, TV, or computer may help you be more active.

For more information on [physical activity](#), go to canada.ca. Search for “Physical Activity”.

Other ideas to help manage constipation

- Try to poop when you feel the urge. If you ignore this feeling your poop can become hard and dry, making it more difficult to pass.
- The gut is most active after eating, so eating small meals and snacks throughout the day may help you poop more often.
- Write down what you eat and drink, your activity level, and how often you poop. This may help you find out what's causing the constipation.



For examples, check out ahs.ca/NutritionHandouts and search “journal”.

What about probiotics?

Probiotics are bacteria and yeast that may help balance the bacteria in your gut (stomach and bowel).

There are many different types and strains of probiotics that work in different ways. Talk to your healthcare team about probiotic supplements.

Good food sources of probiotics include live-culture yogurt, kefir, and yogurt drinks.



What about laxatives?

Laxatives are fibre supplements, pills, or liquids that can help relieve constipation. These may help if your constipation doesn't get better on a higher fibre diet or if you can't get enough fibre from food.

Laxatives shouldn't be used for too long. They can cause the muscles in your gut to stop working properly. This can make constipation worse.

If you use a laxative, follow the instructions on the package or from your healthcare team.

It's best not to use herbal laxatives as the safety of these for constipation is not known.

Compared to other laxatives, fibre supplements are safer for adults to use for a long time. Common fibre supplements are:

- inulin
- methylcellulose
- psyllium
- wheat bran

Fibre supplements can cause gas, cramps, and bloating and need enough fluid to work properly. Drink the amount of fluid recommended on the package.



People who are pregnant should talk with their healthcare team **before** taking laxatives or fibre supplements to manage constipation.

When to talk to your doctor about constipation

Constipation can be a symptom of other health problems. It can also be caused by some kinds of medicine. Talk to your doctor if:

- constipation is new or not normal for you
- the problem comes and goes, but lasts for longer than 3 weeks
- your constipation doesn't get better after a few weeks of following the advice in this handout
- you're using laxatives often
- you have alternating constipation and diarrhea
- there is blood in the toilet or on the toilet paper after you poop
- you have bloating, fever, stomach pain, or vomiting
- you have low appetite

For more information:

Visit ahs.ca/NutritionHandouts.

Look for:

- Fibre Facts
- Eat More Vegetables and Fruit



- Talk to your healthcare team.
- Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete a [self-referral form](#) on ahs.ca/811.
- Visit ahs.ca/nutrition.