Constipation

This fact sheet is for people who have presented to the emergency department with this condition.

This fact sheet provides general information. If you have specific concerns, speak to your healthcare professional for further information and advice.

What is constipation?

Constipation is the word used when you have difficulty passing stools. In most people, constipation is not serious. Simple lifestyle changes can treat it. But sometimes constipation points to another condition that needs addressing.

You are being sent home from the emergency department because your constipation does not seem to be part of another condition that needs urgent treatment. The following advice may help you to understand your constipation.

There is a wide range of normal bowel habits. Some people go to the toilet to pass stools two to three times a day. Other people pass stools two to three times a week.

If there is a *change* from your usual pattern it may mean you are constipated. In general, it is normal to pass a soft stool at least three times a week. Chronic constipation means the problem has been present for at least 12 weeks out of the past six months.

Symptoms

Constipation is common. If you are constipated, you may experience one or more of the following:

- your stools (faeces) become hard and difficult or painful to pass
- the time between toilet trips increases compared to your usual pattern
- crampy pains may occur in the lower part of your abdomen
- you may feel bloated or nauseous
- it does not feel as though you have emptied your bowel or 'finished' after you have been to the toilet to pass a stool.

Causes

Some causes of constipation, including the following:

- not eating enough fibre (roughage)
- not drinking enough fluid

- some special slimming diets
- being less active
- pregnancy
- some medications
- various medical conditions.

Home care

If you keep your body moving, it helps to keep your gut moving.

Eat plenty of fibre

Examples of foods high in fibre include:

- oats, barley, corn and maize
- nuts and seeds
- fruit and vegetables
- wheat and bran
- whole grains, for example, brown rice and whole-wheat bread, pasta and crackers.

Sorbitol is a sugar found in fruit, including prunes and dried fruit. Sorbitol is not digested very well and draws water into the gut, helping to soften stools.

Drink fluids

You will pass most fluid you drink as urine. But some passes to your gut and helps soften stools. To ease constipation:

- you can drink most fluids but avoid alcohol
- drink a glass of water three to four times a day, on top of what you normally drink.

If you have an underlying health condition, talk to your doctor.

Toileting routines

Good habits can relieve your problem.

- Do not ignore the feeling of needing the toilet. When you go to the toilet, do not hurry.
- If possible, try going to the toilet first thing in the morning or about 30 minutes after a meal.
- How you sit on the toilet is important. Place a small footstool under your feet and relax. Lean forward, resting your elbows on your thighs.
- Don’t strain and hold your breath to pass stools.

What to expect

If the lifestyle changes do not work, there are medications that treat constipation. Discuss these with your doctor.

See your doctor if you have any of the following symptoms alongside constipation. Or if you are constipated and older than 50:

- rectal bleeding – blood in stools is usually caused by piles (haemorrhoids) but it can sometimes be a sign of a more serious condition
- sudden weight loss
- constipation that is sudden
- a feeling that something is blocking or obstructing your stools
- rectal prolapse (this is when part of your rectum sticks out through your anus)
- change in the thickness and shape of your stools.