

# Constipation

**This leaflet offers more information about how to manage constipation. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your care.**

## What is Constipation?

Constipation is a very common condition affecting people of all ages. It is a difficulty emptying the bowel (or passing stools). It can mean straining to open the bowels or being unable to completely empty your bowels.

Constipation can cause your stool to be unusually hard and lumpy, large or small. Constipation can be acute (lasting only a short period of time) or chronic (lasting a longer period of time).

## Signs and Symptoms of Constipation

If you are experiencing any of the following you may be constipated:

- Fewer bowel movements than normal
- Pain when passing stools
- Straining when passing stools
- Abdominal pain and bloating
- Hard and dry stool
- Sore bottom
- Leaking of liquid or loose stools (sometimes the solid stool can cause a blockage, around which liquid stool can leak)
- Opening bowels less than three times a week
- A bad taste in the mouth, bad breath, decreased appetite and lethargy.

If you have any of these symptoms, or bleeding or mucous from the back passage, or any other bowel changes that last for more than two weeks, it is important that you inform your GP.

## Why do I have Constipation?

There are many reasons for people developing constipation. These can include:

- Diet
- Pregnancy
- Lack of fluids and being dehydrated
- Slow transit of the colon
- Lack of exercise
- Some medicines, especially pain killers
- Some neurological problems (e.g. Parkinson's disease or Multiple Sclerosis)
- Irritable Bowels Syndrome (IBS), Colitis and Crohn's Disease
- Ignoring the urge to open your bowels
- Emotional and psychological problems.

## What can I do to help my Constipation?

There are several things you can do to optimise your bowel health and avoid constipation. These include dietary, behavioural and physical components.

### Dietary Advice

It is important to optimise your stool type. A bulky and soft stool will be easier to empty compared to small hard pellet stools or mushy stools.

- Aim to eat between five and seven portions of vegetables and fruit each day. These will help to ensure your stool remains soft as well as forming a gel type substance that can help move food along the digestive tract. The skins of fruit and vegetables can also provide fibre to bulk to your stool.
- Ensure your diet also includes some wholegrain or wholemeal carbohydrates (for example brown rice, brown pasta, granary or wholemeal bread etc.). The “husks” cannot be absorbed and add bulk to your stool. High fibre food can help move the stool down the gut. If you notice that increasing fibre causes worsening symptoms, you may have a digestive problem and should seek advice from a dietician or your GP.
- Introduce fibre gradually.
- Some foods have a natural laxative effect for some people. You could try any of the following: prunes or prune juice, liquorice, golden flaxseed and coffee (or other caffeinated drinks).
- Aim to drink 1.5 litres of fluid each day. This will ensure you are well hydrated and therefore keep your stool soft and help with bowel movement.

If you have a digestive problem please seek advice from a dietician or your GP as this information may not be applicable to you.

### Healthy Bowel Habits

- Starting your day by eating a good size breakfast can stimulate your gut. Most people will find that the strongest urge to open their bowels is 20-30 minutes after breakfast. It can be helpful to spend some time sitting on the toilet at this time to see if nature takes its course and you are able to empty your bowels before your day starts. It is important that you relax and don't rush. Do not be tempted to try and push or strain if the urge to empty does not come.
- Don't ignore the urge to empty your bowels. The first urge you experience will be when your stool is at its most easy to pass. Putting off opening your bowels can cause the stool to dry out making it harder to pass.

### Defaecatory dynamics (Toilet positions)

The position in which you sit on the toilet to empty your bowels can make a big difference to your constipation. It is important that your pelvic floor muscles are able to relax in order for you to empty your bowels. In order to optimise this, try the following position:

## Correct position for opening your bowels



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### Other tips:

- If you are taking any medicines ask your doctor or pharmacist if they could be contributing to your constipation. Discuss with your doctor before stopping any prescribed medication.
- Ask your pharmacist about suitable fibre supplements, suppository or mini-enemas to help you open your bowels. These should not be used long term.

Finally, retraining and muscle strengthening can take time. Do not give up as, if you persist, you will find that your symptoms improve. Seek further help or advice by consulting a Pelvic Health physiotherapist if you are not already seeing one. Your GP can make this referral for you.

### Useful sources of information

Continence Foundation / The Bladder and Bowel Foundation (B&BF)

<https://www.bladderandbowel.org>

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about constipation please contact Pelvic Health Physiotherapy on 020 8725 1333.

**For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk)**

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## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

### NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

**Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

**Tel:** 111

### AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all of our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website ([www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



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