

# Constipation

**This leaflet offers 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.**

If you have any bleeding or mucous from the back passage or any other change in your bowel habits that last for more than three weeks, it is important that you inform your GP.

## What is constipation?

Constipation is a common condition that affects people of all ages. You may have constipation if you are passing stools less often than usual or you are finding it more difficult to fully empty your bowels. Your stools may be hard and lumpy or small pellet sized lumps. In most cases constipation can be improved through simple and consistent lifestyle changes.

## Signs and symptoms of constipation

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

- Fewer bowel movements than what's normal for you
- Opening bowels less than three times a week
- Straining when passing stools
- Pain when passing stools
- Passing hard and dry stool.

In addition to the above you may also experience:

- Abdominal pain and bloating
- Sore bottom
- Leaking of liquid or loose stools (sometimes the solid stool can cause a blockage, around which liquid stool can leak)
- A bad taste in the mouth, bad breath, decreased appetite and lethargy.

If you are experiencing any of the additional symptoms and do not think this could be linked to constipation, please speak to your GP.

## Why do I have constipation?

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

- Diet: Not eating enough fibre (found in fruit, vegetables and grains) or skipping meals / going long periods without eating.
- Hormonal changes: This may be just before your period (pre-menstrually), during pregnancy or around menopause

- Lack of fluids and being dehydrated will cause your stools to be harder.
- Repeatedly ignoring the urge to open your bowels
- Lack of exercise and regular movement.
- Some medicines, especially pain killers. It is important not to stop any medication without consulting your GP or pharmacist first.
- Some neurological problems (e.g. Parkinson's disease or Multiple Sclerosis)
- Irritable Bowels Syndrome (IBS), colitis and Crohn's disease
- Emotional and psychological problems (e.g. stress or anxiety).

## 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.

- Try to have regular meals to help your digestive system to work more smoothly.
- Aim to eat between five and seven portions of vegetables and fruit each day. This 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 dietitian 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 to keep your stool soft and ease bowel movement. If you have a digestive problem, please seek advice from a dietitian or your GP as this information may not be applicable to you.

### Healthy bowel habits

- Starting your day by eating a good size breakfast and having a warm drink can stimulate your gut. Most people will find that the strongest urge to open their bowels is within the first hour after having breakfast. It can be helpful to

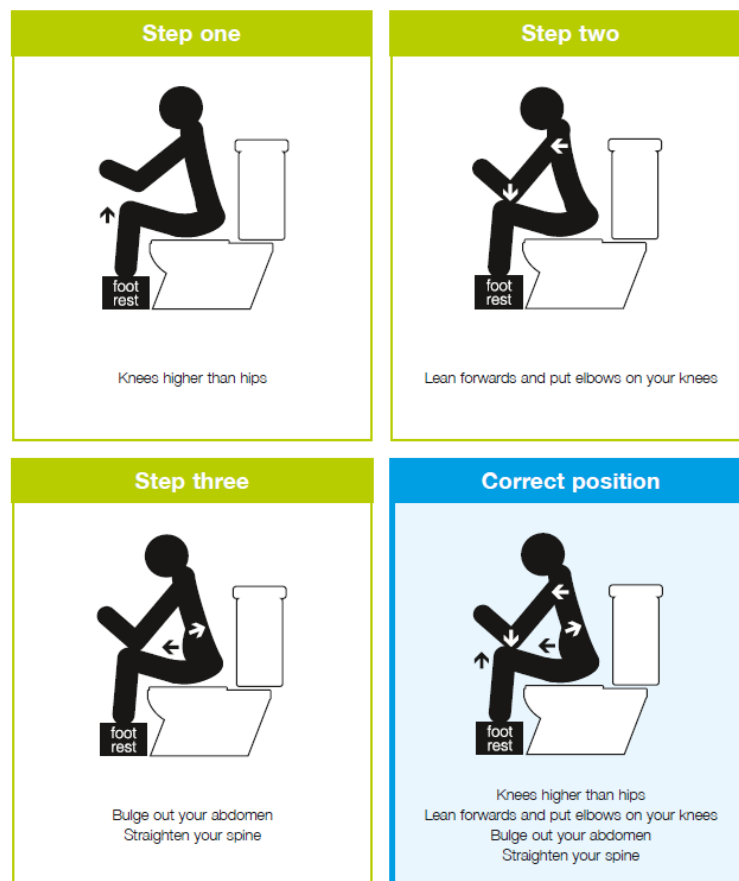
spend some time sitting on the toilet at this time to see if nature takes its course and you are able to empty your bowels before your day starts. It is important that you relax and don't rush. Do not be tempted to try to push or strain if the urge to empty does not come.

- Go whenever you feel the urge to go. The first urge you experience will be when your stool is at its most easy to pass. Ignoring opening your bowels can cause the stool to dry out making it harder to pass.
- Try to manage any stress and anxiety best as you can.

## 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 can relax for you to empty your bowels. 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.

## Useful sources of information

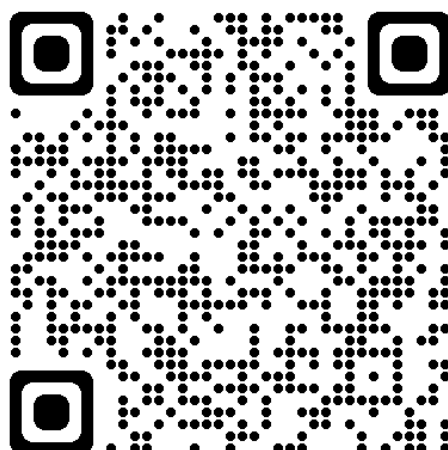
Continence Foundation / The Bladder and Bowel Foundation (B&BF)

[Supporting Your Bladder & Bowel Health | Bladder & Bowel Community \(bladderandbowel.org\)](https://www.bladderandbowel.org)

How to get more fibre into your diet

[How to get more fibre into your diet - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)

## Our Healthy Bladder & Bowel Habits Video



## 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)**

## 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 wings (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 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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