

## CONSTIPATION

### WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD I AND MY FAMILY BE ASKING?

- Am I having three bowel movements or less a week?
  - Am I straining or having painful bowel movements?
  - Am I taking any medications that can cause constipation?
  - Am I drinking enough water and eating foods with high fiber?
  - Does my belly bloat or is painful after I eat?
  - Do I see blood in my stool after a bowel movement?
  - Do I have any nausea or vomiting?
  - Do I have a family history of colon cancer or bowel diseases?
  - Do I have urinary symptoms such as burning when peeing or feeling my bladder is full despite peeing?
  - Do I have an urgency to rush to the washroom to pee?
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### WHAT ACTIONS CAN I TAKE FOR THIS AGENDA?

- Drink lots of water (unless you have been told by your doctor not to because of another medical condition), and eat foods with high fiber
  - Exercise and move often as this stimulates your gut to move too
  - Consider using laxatives especially “Pegalyte” as it is better studied in older adults if lifestyle changes do not help. Talk to your doctor first
  - Always talk to your doctor if you feel constipated so they can look for specific causes like thyroid problems, tumors, or bowel inflammation
  - Review the medications you are taking with your doctor as some can cause constipation such as opioids and iron supplements
  - Take advantage of the bowel’s natural time to have a movement especially after meals and in the morning
  - Depending on your age and risk factors, you may need to be screened for colon cancer. Talk to your doctor about this
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## WHAT DOES CONSTIPATION MEAN?

- Constipation can have different meanings to different people. Even between patients and doctors
  - Generally, constipation refers to the difficulty in having a bowel movement. Some see it as not going as frequently as one should. Others see it as straining or having pain when having a bowel movement
  - If you have two or more of the following you are considered constipated:
    - Having less than three movements per week
    - Only having normal movements when using laxatives
    - Straining and painful bowel movements
    - Lumpy hard stools
    - A sensation of incomplete voiding of stool
    - A sensation of bowel blockage
    - Use your fingers to remove stool
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## HOW COMMON IS CONSTIPATION?

- Some studies show that constipation is as common as 25% to 50% of older adults. Laxatives are used by over 20% of older adults
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## CONSTIPATION IS COMMON AND CAN PRESENT AS LESS THAN THREE MOVEMENTS A WEEK OR PAINFUL STRAINING DURING A MOVEMENT

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## WHAT INCREASES MY RISK OF GETTING CONSTIPATION?

- Female gender
- Low physical activity
- Depression
- Taking too many medications
- Medication side effects

- Eating and drinking less (especially water)
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### **WHAT ARE THE ALARMING SYMPTOMS OF CONSTIPATION?**

- Alarming symptoms are symptoms that are more serious when presenting with constipation
  - Meaning it may not be from a simple cause such as not eating enough fiber or drinking enough water
  - Alarming symptoms could mean you have a more serious diagnosis such as a long-term (chronic) illness
  - Always talk to your doctor if you have constipation for a long time with the following alarming features:
    - Blood that can be seen in the stool
    - A medical history of anemia (low hemoglobin)
    - Persistent constipation that doesn't respond to treatment or laxatives
    - Unintentional weight loss
    - Family history of colon cancer or bowel diseases
    - Sudden or severe start of constipation in older adults without a clear cause
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### **ALWAYS TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU NOTICE ANY "ALARMING" SYMPTOMS SUCH AS VISIBLE BLOOD, WEIGHT LOSS, AND A HISTORY OF COLON CANCER**

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### **WHAT IS DIARRHEA?**

- Diarrhea is considered to be the opposite of constipation
- Diarrhea can mean loose watery stools
- Diarrhea can also mean having many frequent bowel movements such as three times or more per day
- Having diarrhea can cause dehydration

- You lose important body salts (electrolytes) such as sodium, potassium, and magnesium
  - There are many causes for diarrhea so talk to your doctor if you notice your stools are very frequent or loose and watery
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### **CAN CONSTIPATION PRESENT WITH DIARRHEA?**

- Yes. It may sound odd, but if one has a lot of stool blocking their bowels, it may look like diarrhea when it is constipation
  - The watery parts can go around the hard stool and may cause what looks like diarrhea. This is called “overflow incontinence”
  - It might be necessary to take laxatives to resolve it
  - Always talk to your doctor to know if you are constipated or have a true diarrhea illness
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**DIARRHEA IS THE OPPOSITE OF CONSTIPATION. HOWEVER, CONSTIPATION CAN LOOK LIKE DIARRHEA IF THE HARD STOOLS LET THE WATERY PARTS PASS**

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### **WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES OF CONSTIPATION?**

- There are many causes that can lead to constipation
- It is important to know the common causes. Some examples are:
  - Hormone changes such as thyroid diseases
  - Injury to the nervous system causing the nerves in your bowels not to work. Examples are diabetes, Parkinson’s disease, or spine injury
  - Medication side effects such as from opioids like morphine
  - Muscle blockage or injuries such as from a tumor or inflammatory disease in the bowels
- Low fiber diet and dehydration

### **WHAT ARE BAD OUTCOMES THAT CAN HAPPEN FROM LONG-TERM OR UNCONTROLLED CONSTIPATION?**

- Increase the risk of hemorrhoids (abnormal large anal veins)
  - Increases risk for bleeding from the rectum from cuts and tears
  - Increases risk of urine retention and bladder infections (UTI)
  - Having long-term pain in your gut when you have a bowel movement
  - Stool “impaction” meaning stools cause blockage of your bowels causing pain. If severe enough, a tear in the intestines can happen
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### **THERE ARE MANY CAUSES FOR CONSTIPATION SUCH AS HORMONE CHANGES, BOWEL DISEASES, CANCER, AND NERVE INJURY**

### **CONSTIPATION CAN CAUSE HEMORRHOIDS, BLOOD IN YOUR STOOL, RECTAL CUTS, AND BLOCKED BOWELS THAT CAN TEAR**

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### **DO I NEED ANY BLOOD TESTS OR IMAGING TO DIAGNOSE CONSTIPATION?**

- Constipation is usually diagnosed without any tests. Sometimes your doctor may order some blood tests to make sure you don't have a specific cause for constipation
  - An x-ray of the gut can be done to see how constipated you are if you have gut pain and bloating
  - The most important part of diagnosing constipation is to tell your doctor about your bowel movements
  - They may also examine your belly and rectum
  - Talk to your doctor to see if you need any tests or imaging done as you may not need any
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### **IS THERE TREATMENT FOR CONSTIPATION?**

- Your doctor must first make sure there is no specific cause to your constipation before starting treatment
- That's because treating the underlying cause is very important
- After that, the first step in treatment is lifestyle and dietary changes
- Meaning, to eat more food with fiber and to exercise. You should also drink lots of water (so that your urine is a pale yellow color) unless you are told by your doctor not to because of another medical condition
- Having your bowel movements at the same time helps
- The best time to take advantage of having a bowel movement easily is after meals and in the morning time when you wake up
- After breakfast is usually an ideal time when your gut is more ready to have a bowel movement than other times
- If all of that does not work, then a trial of some laxatives can help with constipation. The best-studied laxatives in older adults are called "osmotic" laxatives
- The most commonly used type has many names but is called "Peglyte" or "Lax-a-day" or "Restoralax"
- Another common laxative that is studied is called "Lactulose"
- If those fail, other types of laxatives can be used. Talk to your doctor to learn more about them and what would be best for you
- Be careful to not cause diarrhea instead of constipation. If your stools become too watery and too frequent you may be taking too much
- Always talk to your doctor before starting laxatives to know which type and how frequently to use them

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**EATING FOODS WITH HIGH FIBER AND DRINKING A LOT OF WATER HELPS**

**THE EASIEST TIME TO HAVE A BOWEL MOVEMENT IS IN THE MORNING AFTER BREAKFAST**

**"PEGLYTE" IS THE MOST STUDIED LAXATIVE IN OLDER ADULTS**

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**SHOULD I USE ENEMAS?**

- Treating constipation usually doesn't need the use of enemas or suppositories
  - Only in severe cases that do not respond to treatment or in those that have a lot of stool in the rectum may benefit from these
  - Even then, studies do not show much evidence for them. Always talk to your doctor before using them
  - Some studies show using phosphate enemas can be harmful to older adults by losing important body salts (electrolytes)
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### **WHAT ARE EXAMPLES OF FOODS WITH HIGH FIBER?**

- Fruits such as bananas, oranges, apples, mangoes, and strawberries
  - Many vegetables and generally the darker the color the greater the fiber
  - Beans such as those found in salads and soups
  - Bread and grains such as wheat bread, granolas, and bran flakes
  - Nuts such as almonds and walnuts
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### **ENEMAS ARE USUALLY NOT NEEDED. THEY ARE USED FOR SEVERE CASES MAINLY**

### **THERE ARE MANY FOODS WITH HIGH FIBERS SUCH AS FRUITS, VEGETABLES, BREAD, BEANS, AND NUTS**

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