

## Constipation

by Dr. Sara Ohgushi, Naturopathic Physician

Q: It's embarrassing to mention, but I'm often constipated. What can help besides laxatives?

A: While you may not be discussing it with your friends and family, if you did you would find that constipation is a very common condition, causing significant discomfort and less obvious effects. Normal, healthy bowel elimination involves having a natural urge, going to the bathroom when you have the urge, and then painlessly passing a soft but well-formed stool that leaves you with a sense of completion, generally 1-2x/day. (Occasionally skipping a day is healthy for some people.) Less frequent, harder, painful and/or incomplete are all variations of the word "constipation".

Constipation is a direct cause of anal fissures and hemorrhoids, which can be quite painful and may bleed. There are many indirect effects as well. The liver performs many roles and one of them is detoxification. Environmental toxins, pharmaceuticals and excess hormones are converted by the liver into forms that are excreted into the bile which then goes into your digestive tract and are supposed to be eliminated with your stool. If things aren't moving as they should, toxins and hormone byproducts are reabsorbed. This can contribute to joint pain, fatigue, headaches and hormonal imbalances leading to symptoms such as PMS or increased menopause symptoms.

The prevalence of constipation is evident with the huge variety of laxatives available. Some pull fluid into the GI tract and may cause dehydration; many irritate the smooth muscles, resulting in painful cramping or even diarrhea. If you use such laxatives or enemas frequently, your body may become dependent on the stimulation and lose the natural urge to stool. This is generally not irreversible, however.

Diet obviously plays an important role in elimination. Lots of dairy products and simple carbohydrates such as white rice, white bread, pasta, baked goods and potatoes will "plug up" most people. **Fiber** in whole grains such as brown rice, slow-cooking oatmeal and whole grain bread, as well as in fruits and vegetables, is vital to elimination. Equally vital is plenty of **water**; the fiber absorbs water and creates a slippery stool that slides along. (Fiber without enough water can actually worsen constipation.)

In addition to eating foods high in fiber, a fiber supplement may be necessary. **Psyllium seeds** are the main ingredient in Metamucil, which also contains artificial sweeteners, colors and flavors. Buying psyllium seeds in bulk and adding them to some juice is a healthier alternative (try 1 TBSP/day as needed). You can grind them in a coffee grinder if that is more palatable. A daily **bran** muffin or bran cereal may also work well. However, my favorite fiber supplement is **flax seeds**, because they also contain essential fatty acids, the good fats, that most people need more of. Grind 1 TBSP/day and add to anything cold such as applesauce, or a smoothie with fruit and soymilk or juice.

**Acidophilus** is the main healthy bacteria we all have in our digestive tract that helps in digestion and keeps any “bad” bacteria in check. Antibiotics kill all bacteria, good and bad. Digestive upsets including vomiting, diarrhea and constipation can all deplete acidophilus. Similarly, taking high quality acidophilus (usually refrigerated and somewhat expensive) often restores healthy digestion. I have seen acidophilus alone, 1 capsule twice a day, relieve long-term constipation in an older person. Once a balance is reestablished, you do not have to keep taking the acidophilus. Just keep it on hand for when things feel out of balance.

Regular **exercise** has innumerable benefits and one of them is encouraging normal bowel elimination. If the word “exercise” sounds intimidating, consider a brisk 15-20 min walk in the morning or after dinner, which even 2-3x week can make a significant difference to your health. With the long cool summer evenings we have here in Oregon, there is really no excuse at this time of year.

Long-term persistent constipation may take a more individualized approach. Constitutional homeopathic treatment, as provided by professionals such as myself, is often very effective in treating constipation. Many people have been constipated to some degree for so long that they assume that is how it has to be, and they are amazed at how much better they feel when their elimination goes more smoothly (literally!) This could be you...

Note: This article is not meant to substitute for direct medical advice. For more details, references to this article or questions, email Dr. Ohgushi at [sao@imagina.com](mailto:sao@imagina.com), or call her at 503-703-7825 to schedule a free 20 minute consultation. Dr. Ohgushi is licensed in Natural Childbirth and provides full prenatal, birth and postpartum services. As a Naturopathic Physician she

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