



## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

### *Break bad habits*

To avoid constipation, keeping up a healthy and balanced diet is very important.

You should try to eat as much fresh fruit and vegetables as possible.

Choose wholemeal bread rather than white, and eat some wholegrain cereals (e.g. muesli) regularly.

These kinds of food make sure you get enough fibre (roughage), which keeps your lower intestine working well.

You should also drink enough fluids: depending on the climate where you live, you might need a minimum of 1.2-2 litres of water or juice per day.

Regular exercise (if possible, at least 30 minutes daily) is good for your digestion.

If your living conditions are very stressful, you should consider how to reduce your stress levels.



## TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

### *Get some help*

Nobody feels very comfortable talking about her or his bowel movements.

But don't worry - you can always talk to your family doctor about this. Remember how common constipation is: that means your doctor helps a lot of people with these problems.

It's a good idea to make some notes. For a week or two, keep track of what you eat and how often you go to the toilet.

Write down any medication you are taking, and any recent illnesses you have had. All these things will help your doctor to decide what treatment is right for you.

## CONSTIPATION

*A very frequent complaint ...*



*... but still a taboo topic*



## WHAT IS CONSTIPATION?

### *Symptom or disease?*

Constipation is a name for several different problems with passing stool. It is a very common complaint; one in three people experience it at some time.

Constipation can mean that someone has only one or two bowel movements per week. It can also mean that you have to strain hard when you go to the toilet; that your stool is hard and lumpy; or that you have the feeling that your bowel movements are not finished.

Usually, constipation is not a very serious condition. But if symptoms of constipation like those described above persist for several weeks or months, you should consult your doctor.

## WHAT CAUSES CONSTIPATION?

### *Diverse reasons*

Constipation is often caused by poor lifestyle and diet, for example:

- not enough wholemeal bread/cereal
- not enough fruits and vegetables
- stress
- irregular daily routine
- not enough exercise



But there are also other causes:

- many medications can cause constipation as a side effect
- pregnancy
- restricted mobility due to old age, disability or illness
- psychiatric problems such as depression
- other medical conditions

If any of these things apply to you, you should talk to your doctor.

## HOW IS CONSTIPATION TREATED?

### *Lifestyle and medication*

Constipation can be treated in two ways:

- by changing your diet and lifestyle or
- using laxatives

Constipation is often caused by the wrong combination of bacteria in our large intestine.

A diet rich in fibre helps to restore the balance because dietary fibre is food for bacteria considered as health-promoting. Certain laxatives can help to restore a healthy balance of bacteria in the gut.

## HOW DO LAXATIVES WORK?

### *Different modes of action*

Laxatives are substances that should make your bowel movements easier and more regular. There are several different kinds of laxatives available.

#### Fibre

Psyllium (also called ispaghula) is a natural fibre that absorbs a lot of water. In the large intestine, it helps to keep the stool softer and wetter. It can be a good treatment for mild constipation but is not reliably efficient.

#### Macrogol

Macrogol is a synthetic polymer (polyethylene glycol) which absorbs water and makes the stool larger and softer. It is an effective laxative. It should normally be used for up to two weeks.

#### Lactulose

Lactulose is a derivative of the natural milk sugar lactose. It is not digested in the small intestine. In the large intestine, it promotes growth of certain beneficial bacteria, making the stool larger, softer and wetter. It is an effective laxative and is safe to use for a longer time if necessary.

#### Stimulant laxatives

Substances such as senna extract, picosulphate and bisacodyl are strong laxatives which stimulate contraction of the colon and rectum, causing bowel movements. They should only be used occasionally and for a short term.

**Before using any laxatives,  
you should consult your  
doctor and/or pharmacist.**