WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT... CHRONIC CONSTIPATION

WHAT ARE MY TREATMENT OPTIONS?

Treatment options for chronic constipation consist primarily of dietary and lifestyle changes and/or laxatives. You may wish to talk to your pharmacist to discuss which laxatives are available over the counter. Other possible treatment options may include complementary therapies, prescription medication or a surgical intervention, in some specific cases.

If your symptoms persist, you should speak to your doctor who may recommend a course of treatment.

HOW CAN I TALK TO MY DOCTOR?

You might feel uncomfortable or embarrassed talking to your doctor about your chronic constipation, but remember, doctors talk about embarrassing problems every day and it is important that you give them a complete picture of your symptoms. Sometimes writing a list of things you want to tell them can make it easier. Things to note down include:

- Your symptoms.
- How long you have been constipated.
- Any techniques you use to aid a bowel movement.
- Your medical history.
- Any medication you are currently taking (including any over the counter treatments for constipation).
- How your constipation affects your daily life.

If you have been keeping a diary take this along with you, it will help to give your doctor a clear picture of your bowel movements and lifestyle.

You may like to have a list of questions to ask your doctor. These could include:

- What is causing my chronic constipation?
- Will I need any tests?
- Will there be any long-term effects of being constipated?
- What can I do to help myself?
- What treatment options are there?
- When will you want to see me again?
- Will I need to be referred to a specialist?

YOUR BOWEL MOVEMENTS

Most bowels respond best to a regular habit. About 30 minutes after eating is the most likely time for the bowel to work, because of an internal body reflex called the gastro-colic response.

Never rush going to the toilet. If you have a tendency to be constipated, sit aside at least 10 minutes in the toilet. Preferably this should be at a time when you are not rushing to do other things.

Sitting differently on the toilet may help your bowel movements. The natural position is a ‘squat’, which is not practical on most toilets. To mimic this position, try raising your feet with a footstool by around 25cm (10in), keep them flat and hip width apart, and lean forwards on your thighs and relax.

Remember to breathe normally when having a bowel movement! Some people hold their breath as they try and push but this just makes it harder.

If you are taking any medicines (either prescribed by your doctor or bought over the counter) you should discuss them with your doctor in case they are contributing to your constipation.

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WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY CONSTIPATION?

Try keeping a diary to track your chronic constipation-related symptoms, which you can then discuss with your doctor at your next visit. Note down the frequency and consistency of your bowel movement and anything else you think may be useful to record, such as what you have eaten and if you have done any exercise.

DIET AND EXERCISE

The recommendations below may not be suitable for all patients. If you are unsure, please consult your doctor.

- Eating regularly is a good natural stimulant for your bowel. Skipping meals, especially breakfast, can contribute to a sluggish or irregular bowel habit.
- A high fibre diet may help your constipation. Fruit, vegetables, nuts, wholemeal bread and pasta, wholegrain cereals and brown rice are all good sources of fibre. Try to have at least one high fibre food at every meal and eat five servings (or approximately 400g) of fruit or vegetables every day to improve your overall nutrition.
- Some people find it helps to have their fibre from fruit or vegetables (soluble fibre) rather than in cereals or grains (insoluble fibre), because insoluble fibre can sometimes lead to bloating and discomfort.
- Remember, if you suffer from chronic constipation and already have an adequate intake of fibre, be careful to not eat too much fibre as it may make your constipation worse.
- Try to drink at least eight glasses of fluid each day. It is not advisable to drink too much caffeine (coffee, tea and cola) as this can be dehydrating, as is alcohol. Too much fluid intake however can sometimes make you feel more bloated and is unlikely to improve your bowel function further.
- Sport and exercise can improve bowel habits in some people. If you lead a very sedentary lifestyle (such as driving to work and then sitting at a desk all day), add in some incremental exercise, such as taking a regular walk at lunchtime. Small measures like this can make a real difference.