

Normal Bowel Movements

During digestion, nutrients are removed from the food you eat. The waste that's left (stool) is passed on to the **colon** (large intestine). The colon's main job is to absorb water from the stool before it leaves the body. Normally, stool moves through the colon at a steady, regular pace - not too fast or too slow. The stool stays in the colon just long enough for most of the water to be absorbed, with enough water left to ease the passage of the stool out of the body.

Constipation

If the stool moves through the colon more slowly than normal, it stays in the colon too long. Because water is constantly being removed, the stool becomes dry and hard. This causes constipation: bowel movements that are less frequent than usual and very difficult or painful.

High-Fiber Hints

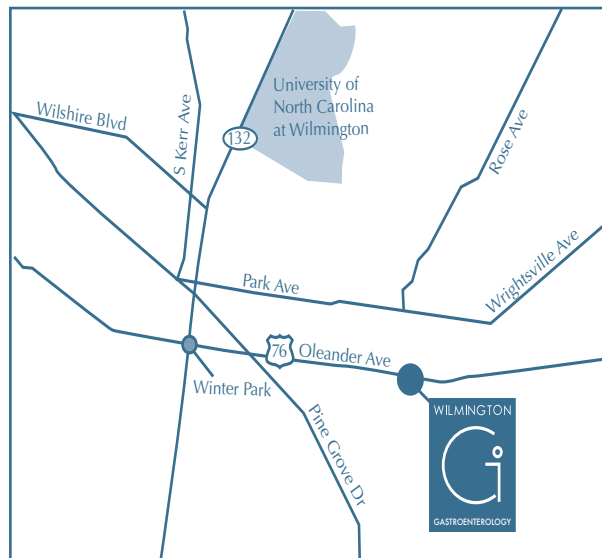
Eating more of the following foods can add fiber to your diet and help prevent constipation:

- High fiber cereals
- Whole grains, bran and brown rice
- Vegetables (such as carrots, broccoli, and peas)
- Fresh fruits (especially apples, pears and dried fruits like raisin and apricots)
- Nuts and legumes (especially beans such as lentils, kidney beans and lima beans)

If necessary, your doctor may also recommend an over-the-counter fiber supplement.

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CONSTIPATION

Getting Relief



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An Uncomfortable Problem

Constipation is a common and often uncomfortable problem. You have constipation if you have bowel movements less often than usual or strain to pass hard, dry stool. Constipation can be a temporary problem that lasts a short time, or it can be a chronic problem that never seems to go away. Fortunately, it can often be controlled.

Symptoms

Symptoms of constipation include:

- Feel of fullness in the rectum
- Bloating and gas
- Feeling the urge, but being unable to pass stool
- Abdominal pain and cramping
- Nausea

Causes of Constipation

One of the main causes of constipation is a diet that's too low in fiber and water. Travel that disrupts your normal routine can lead to temporary constipation. Pregnant women often become constipated. Other causes include getting too little exercise, misusing laxatives, taking certain medication (such as pain medications, diuretics, and antihistamines), or ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement. Diseases such as diabetes or hypothyroidism may also cause constipation.



Your Evaluation

Most of the time, the cause of constipation is not serious. But, in rare cases, chronic constipation may be a sign of an obstruction or abnormality in the colon. Your doctor can evaluate you to determine the cause of your constipation and rule out any underlying disorder.

Your Medical History

Your doctor may ask you questions like these:

- How long have you had symptoms?
- What type of foods do you eat?
- How much activity do you usually get?
- Do you have any other medical problems?
- What medications do you take?
- Do you often use laxatives or enemas?

Tests

Tests may be done to rule out more serious causes of constipation. Your doctor may take a sample of your blood and stool for testing. If needed, a **sigmoidoscopy** may be done. During this test, your doctor views the lower part of your colon through a flexible tube. A special x-ray called a **barium enema** may also be done. For this test, your colon is filled with a liquid barium solution. Then an x-ray is taken of your entire colon.

Treating Constipation

After your evaluation, your doctor can recommend the treatment plan that's best for you. This plan may include eating more fiber, getting more exercise, and avoiding overuse of laxatives.

Eat More Fiber

One of the best way to help treat constipation is to eat a high-fiber diet. Fiber (in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables) adds bulk and absorbs water to soften the stool. This helps the stool pass through the colon more easily. Drinking more water can also help soften stool.

Get Regular Exercise

Regular exercise helps improve the working of your colon and helps ease constipation. Ask your doctor about starting an exercise program.

Avoid Chronic Laxative Use

Laxatives stimulate the colon to work more rapidly. Continuous use of laxatives can cause the colon to stretch and weaken and, eventually, the colon may not work right without them. Your doctor can help you overcome a dependence on laxatives. In any case, never use them without consulting your doctor first.

