Healthy Living: Staying Regular

Linda B. Bobroff and Luisa Oliver-Cordero

What causes constipation in older adults?

- Low fiber intake
- Certain medications
- Limited mobility
- Dehydration
- Chronic laxative abuse
- Ignoring the urge to defecate
- Decreased motility in the colon
- Decreased rectal sensation

Why is staying regular a concern for older adults?

Having a bowel movement fewer than three times a week is defined as constipation. This condition is very common in persons over age 65. Free-living older adults are less likely to be constipated than are persons living in nursing homes. Over time, chronic constipation can cause serious and painful conditions such as hemorrhoids and diverticular disease.

Diverticula are small outpouchings in the gut. When they get inflamed they can be quite painful.

Which medications increase risk for constipation?

Several types of medications can cause constipation in some people. Ask your pharmacist for information about the side effects of each of the medications that you take. Here are some medications commonly associated with constipation:

- Antacids with aluminum or calcium


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What can I do to prevent constipation?

- Eat about 25–30 grams of fiber a day.
- Be as active as possible every day.
- Drink 6–8 cups or more of water and non-alcoholic drinks each day.
- Get into a routine for having a bowel movement; perhaps after breakfast.
- Take a fiber supplement if you are not able to eat enough dietary fiber each day. Talk to your doctor before using fiber supplements.

What are some examples of high-fiber foods?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Fiber (grams)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baked beans, 1/3 cup*</td>
<td>6–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bran cereal, 1 ounce</td>
<td>5–13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat, shredded, 2 biscuits</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bran muffin, 1 medium</td>
<td>2–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh fruits, 1 medium</td>
<td>2–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broccoli, ½ cup</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuts, ¼ cup</td>
<td>2–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole wheat bread, 1 slice</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown rice, ½ cup</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Use canned beans for convenience.

How can I add fiber to my diet?

Many tasty foods contain fiber! You can eat more fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds as snacks and in meals. Make substitutions like using whole grains instead of refined grains in baking.

Where can I get additional, reliable information?

The Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent at your county Extension office may have more written information and classes for you to attend. In Florida, you can find your Extension office at this website: http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map.

A registered dietitian (RD) also can provide reliable information to you.

Visit the following Internet sites for more information:

- http://www.seniors.gov
- http://nutrition.gov
- http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu
- http://www.choosemyplate.gov
- Constipation Myths, a University of Florida IFAS Extension publication http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/fs/fs15500.pdf