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About Constipation

Constipation Overview

Constipation is the most common gastrointestinal complaint — about 4 million Americans experience constipation and make 2.5 million physician visits a year to get help for the problem. Constipation can occur when the colon absorbs too much water, the colon's muscle contraction is slow or sluggish, and/or there is delayed transit time through the colon. The result is stool that is hard and dry. Indicators of constipation include straining during bowel movements greater than 25% of the time, having fewer than three bowel movements per week, and/or the feeling of incomplete evacuation.

There are established guidelines (Rome II) for defining constipation. A person needs to have two or more of the following symptoms for at least 12 weeks (not necessarily consecutive) in the preceding 12 months:

- Straining in greater than 25% of bowel movements
- Lumpy or hard stools in greater than 25% of bowel movements
- Sensation of incomplete emptying in greater than 25% of bowel movements
- Sensation of anorectal obstruction/blockade in greater than 25% of bowel movements
- Manual maneuvers to help empty greater than 25% of bowel movements (e.g., digital evacuation, support of the pelvic floor)
- Less than 3 bowel movements/week
- Loose stools are not present, and criteria for irritable bowel syndrome are insufficient

Common Causes of Constipation

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| • lack of fiber in your diet | • travel |
| • lack of physical activity | • Irritable Bowel Syndrome |
| • medications, including iron and calcium supplements | • pregnancy |
| • dairy intake | • luteal phase of menstruation (after ovulation and before menses) |
| • dehydration | • colorectal problems |
| • abuse of laxatives | • intestinal dysfunction |

Treating Constipation

There are several ways of treating constipation, including changes to diet and exercise, use of laxatives, adjustments to the pelvic floor, and scheduled toileting. These treatments include:

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| • increasing fiber and fluids in the diet | • learning proper toileting techniques and toileting modifications |
| • increasing physical activity | • designing and sticking to a toileting schedule |
| • learning muscle coordination | |