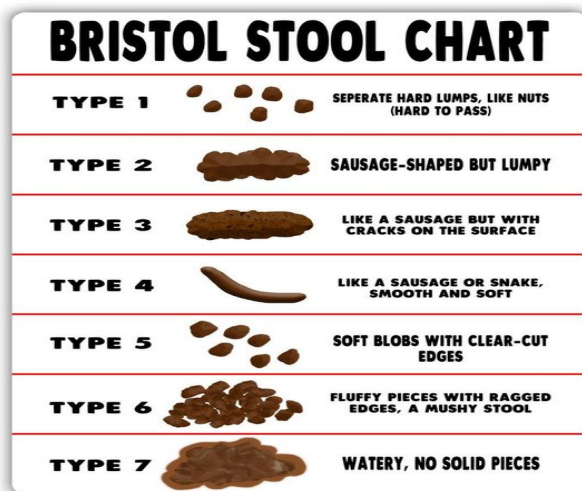


## Constipation Self Care

### What is Considered Constipation?

Constipation, or difficulty emptying one's bowels, is extremely common. Symptoms vary greatly from person to person. Also, what is "normal" for one person, is not "normal" for another. Ideally, one should have 1-3 soft, easy to pass bowel movements daily. However, having a bowel movement every 2-3 days is considered ok, as long as the person is not uncomfortable and does not have to strain or push excessively to empty their bowels. Stool consistency is a good indicator of bowel function. Take a look at this stool chart:



Type 1 and 2 are hard to pass stools. This is considered constipation.

Type 3 and 4 are ideal, easy to pass stools.

Type 5, 6 and 7 indicate intestinal inflammation and are varying degrees of diarrhea.

### What Generally Causes Constipation?

There are two main types of constipation:

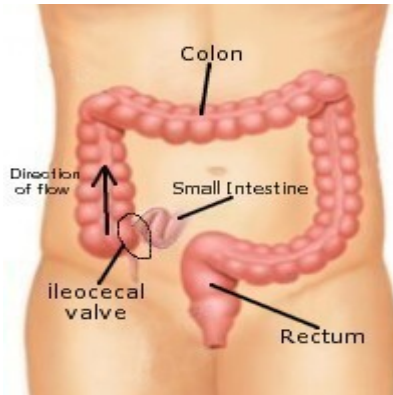
- 1) **Slow Transit Constipation:** This means the bowels are moving the stools too slowly. One way to tell if you have slow transit constipation is to do the "corn test." Corn is not fully broken down by the digestive tract and is easy to see in one's stool. Eat some corn and check your stools to see how long it takes from the time you ate the corn until you pass the corn in your stool. You should be able to see the corn in your stool between 24 and 48 hours later if your bowels are functioning well. This test is not definitive, because the corn may be able to pass around larger "stuck" stools, but it can give you an idea of what is going on.

2) **Outlet Obstruction Constipation:** This means that while the gut may be functioning normally, there is something making it difficult to pass the stool through the anus. This can be caused by:

- *Pelvic Floor Dysfunction:* The pelvic floor muscles, the muscles in the perineum and around the anus, need to relax in order to empty the bowels. Sometimes these muscles are generally “tight” making it difficult to relax these muscles. This is called *overactive pelvic floor muscle dysfunction* or *hypertonic pelvic floor muscle dysfunction*. Also, sometimes these muscles contract instead of relaxing when they are supposed to. This is called *dyssynergia*.
- *Prolapse or Rectocele:* Prolapse refers to when the pelvic organs descend or push down through the vaginal canal. This can create a physical blockage making it difficult to pass stool. A rectocele is when the rectum bulges into the vaginal canal creating a pouch that stool can get stuck in.
- *Tumors and other serious medical conditions:* Make sure to talk to your healthcare provider about constipation that is not responding to treatment, especially if you find blood in your stool.

#### **Tips to Improve Intestinal Motility (“movement”):**

- ✓ *Increase fluids.* Staying hydrated is essential to keeping your stools soft and improving all body functions. In order to figure out how much water you should be drinking daily, take your weight in pounds and divide that number in half. That number is how many ounces of water you should drink in a day. Divide that number by 8 and that is how many cups you should drink.
- ✓ *Increase your fiber intake.* Try adding more fruits, vegetables and whole grains into your diet. “A pear a day keeps constipation away.” You can also try fiber supplements such as Psyllium Husk (Metamucil®). However this can cause bloating, so add gradually.
- ✓ *Speak to your healthcare provider about supplements and stool softeners.* Many people find taking a magnesium supplement and/or probiotics to be very helpful. Other over-the-counter stool softeners include docusate sodium (Colace®) which can also be helpful. While laxatives like sennosides (Senokot®), bisacodyl (Dulcolax®), and polyethylene glycol (Miralax®) improve motility, they can be dangerous if obstruction is present, so discuss with your doctor.
- ✓ *Try self intestinal massage.* While lying comfortably in bed, perform deep but gentle circular movements with both hands in the direction of intestinal movement as shown here:



Start by finding the bump on your pelvic or hip bone on the right side of your lower belly. Move your hands just inside that. Start massaging upwards until you hit your lower ribs. Then move across towards the left until you hit your lower ribs again. Then move downwards until you can feel the bump on your pelvic or hip bone on the left side. Then continue moving diagonally toward the center until you hit your pubic bone. Repeat. Perform this massage for 5 minutes before you go to sleep at night. You may also want to repeat this again upon awakening. The goal is to help stimulate a good morning bowel movement.

- ✓ *Listen to your body's cues.* Do not delay or ignore an urge to have a bowel movement. When you feel an urge to have a bowel movement, that means your intestines are working to move the stools. Take advantage of and encourage your body's natural intestinal movement, because if you wait until later, those natural reflexes may have passed and you may end up straining to pass the stool.

#### **Tips to Improve Bowel Emptying:**

- ✓ *Sit comfortably on the toilet.* While squatting or hovering over public toilets may be more sanitary, it makes it difficult to relax your pelvic floor muscles. Try lining the seat with paper or bring a foldable plastic seat cover with you.
- ✓ *Try a step stool or a "Squatty Potty" under your feet.*



Getting your legs up in a higher, more squat-like position helps the pelvic floor muscles around the rectum and anus to relax. It also helps to decrease the "colo-rectal angle", straightening out the rectum so it can empty more easily. If you think about it, before the invention of modern toilets, we used to squat in order to eliminate.

- ✓ *Relax and take your time.* Be patient with yourself to help your muscles relax and to allow your bowels to empty. Rushing is not conducive to muscle relaxation or bowel emptying. Passing stool involves a process of relaxation and "opening up" – not force.

Place your tongue on the roof of your mouth and drop your jaw into a slightly opened position. This will relax your mouth and your anus at the same time. Remember that the digestive system starts at the mouth and ends at the anus.

- ✓ *Avoid straining.* While you may feel the need to push forcefully in order to empty your bowels, this can sometimes cause the pelvic floor muscles to tighten, preventing bowel emptying or causing incomplete emptying. Straining can be very detrimental to your health and can cause or exacerbate conditions such as prolapse and hemorrhoids. Signs of bad straining include: taking in air and holding it, keeping your lips closed and jaw tense while bearing down, turning red in the face as you push down or feeling faint during or immediately after a bowel movement.
- ✓ *Try breathing techniques instead:* Use quiet breathing to relax the pelvic floor & “open the gate”. Breathe in as if you are smelling sweet scented flowers and breathe out as if you are blowing out candles.
- ✓ *How to push without straining:* Sometimes we need to push, and that’s ok. The trick is to push without holding your breath.
  - Try blowing through pursed lips as if you are trying to blow up a balloon or blow through a straw
  - Try giving deep sighs or grunting while exhaling saying “uhhhhhh”
  - Try different guttural type sounds such as “grrrrr,” “hisssss,” “huff huff huff,” “hut hut hut” or “mooooo.” Whatever doesn’t make you laugh too much. Notice how your belly expands and hardens as you make these sounds. You can also try pulling in your belly while you exhale. This helps to push the stool along. Different sounds work better for different people. Notice which sounds cause your anus to relax more.
- ✓ *If you have a rectocele or a weakened perineum, try splinting.* Try putting gentle pressure on your perineum in the space between the vagina and anus. This can help direct the stool that has gotten stuck in a “pocket” back towards the anus. Or try placing your index finger or thumb into your vagina and press gently on the back wall of the vagina. There is also a product called the Femeeze that you can use instead of putting your finger inside. Ideally, this is not meant to be used on a daily basis long term, but can be helpful to move along stool that is hard to pass while you work on the other methods described above.
- ✓ Avoid sitting on the toilet for more than 10 minutes. If it is taking too long, try again later.

We hope you find these tips useful. Make sure to follow up with your healthcare provider for proper diagnosis and treatment. Severe constipation may be a sign of something more serious. We are here to help.