

Topic: Constipation

By Emmanuel Quaye, MD

Constipation is one of the most common complaints in this country, a condition that affects more than one in four Americans. It is defined as having bowel movements less than three times per week. Stools are usually hard, dry, small in size, and difficult to eliminate. Some people experience pain, straining, bloating, and the sensation of a full bowel. A complaint of constipation depends on an individual's understanding of what constipation is. Some may feel they are constipated if they do not have a bowel movement every day. However, it is considered normal to have as many as three bowel movements a day or as little as three bowel movements a week.

Constipation can have many causes, including a diet that is low in fiber. Other causes may include lack of movement, inadequate hydration, serious disease, effect of medications, and poor bowel habits. Medications that can cause constipation include narcotics such as Lorcet and Percocet, antacids that contain aluminum and calcium, certain blood pressure medications, iron tablets, and several other commonly used medications. Constipation as an entity is different from irritable bowel syndrome, even though the two may be associated.

Often, constipation is due to medical conditions which may make it more difficult to treat. Dysbiosis is a condition in which good bacteria in the colon are replaced by unfriendly bacteria, where the unfriendly bacteria can cause illness. Constipation is one of the common conditions that result from dysbiosis. Food allergies such as lactose intolerance and gluten sensitivity may be associated with diarrhea or constipation. Changes in hormone balance and the overuse of laxatives may also be associated with constipation. Certain nutritional or dietary insufficiencies, such as digestive enzyme deficiency or magnesium deficiency may be associated with constipation. A digestive enzyme is a protein that helps one to break down the food we eat into a form that can be used by the body. One of the biggest causes of constipation is stress, especially chronic stress.

Constipation is such a common condition, that one may wonder why we should bother with it beyond the discomfort it causes us. Beyond the pain and discomfort we suffer with constipation, it is a cause of hemorrhoids, anal fissures, rectal bleeding, rectal prolapse, and a condition known as autointoxication. Autointoxication is a condition where chemical wastes from the body, usually eliminated through the stool, are reabsorbed into the body when the stool sits in the colon for too long.

Evaluating constipation is a job for your doctor. However, being able to communicate well with your doctor about your condition makes it easier to properly diagnose the cause of constipation and adequately treat it. If stress is a problem for you, it is important to communicate that to your doctor. What medications you are taking is also important. Antibiotics can change the friendly gut bacteria into unfriendly bacteria in the condition known as dysbiosis. Diuretics, also known as 'water pills' can cause constipation by causing you to lose magnesium. People taking water pills, who are low on potassium and require potassium supplementation, may also be low on magnesium. Discussing your diet with your doctor is also important because a diet low in fiber can be a cause of constipation.

To treat constipation, it is important that the cause of constipation be properly identified in order to be addressed. Lifestyle modification, including a diet rich in fruits and vegetables (fiber), exercise, and increased water intake in people who are not on water restriction is helpful to treat constipation. Cultured foods, such as yogurt, that are high in friendly bacteria are helpful to ease constipation. It is also important to allow time, and not be in a rush with bowel movements. Laxatives are useful to treat constipation, although one must be careful not to overuse them. When one uses too much laxatives, it is a sign that there may be other causes of constipation that are not being addressed. It may also be a sign that it is time to have a discussion with your doctor. If all else fails, your doctor may write a prescription to treat constipation. Unusual approaches to constipation include stress management, acupuncture, massage and homeopathy.

To prevent constipation, it is important to remember that everyone gets constipated at one time or other, which is okay. It is when it becomes a daily problem that it is an issue. Some people think they are constipated when in fact they are not. Normal bowel movements can be three times a day to three times a week. The most common causes of constipation are a poor diet and lack of exercise. So, eat a good, high fiber diet, exercise regularly and drink plenty of water. If in spite of the above, you have constipation, call your doctor.

If you have any questions about this article, any general issues concerning health, or nutritional supplements, you may contact us at info@magnolia-health.com. If you wish to be seen as a patient, call 843 383-0713.

Wishing you good health.