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Dietary Suggestions to Help Manage Constipation

Constipation

Constipation is a common problem.

Symptoms of constipation can be different for each person. Typical symptoms of constipation are:

- Having less than three bowel movements a week.
- The need to use a lot of pressure, or strain, during a bowel movement.
- Hard, compact stools that are difficult to eliminate.
- Bloating, fullness, discomfort, or pain in the belly.

The long-term effects of constipation can be hemorrhoids, diverticulosis, anal fissure and rectal prolapse.

Causes

As you digest food, it passes from your stomach, through the small intestine and large intestine, and finally through the rectum before it leaves your body.

For many different reasons, stool may stay too long in the colon. When this happens, the colon removes too much water from the stool. This causes the stool to become hard and dry, which is difficult to pass through the colon.

Stool may slow down in the large intestine for many different reasons, including:

- Illness.
- A diet with very little fiber and low fluid intake.
- Ignoring the need to have a bowel movement.
- Lack of exercise.
- Sedentary lifestyle.
- Stress.
- Calcium and iron supplements.
- Some medicines. These include narcotic pain medicine, “water pills” called diuretics, and medicines used to treat high blood pressure, depression, and nausea.

To Manage Constipation

There are ways to help yourself prevent or relieve constipation.

Eat at least three well-balanced meals throughout the day.

Drink plenty of fluid to help keep your stools soft. Aim to drink at least eight, 8-ounce glasses of fluid (64 ounces) during the day. This total includes all types of beverages such as water, juice, milk, tea, coffee, and broth-type soups. Consider drinking a hot beverage first thing in the morning; it may help stimulate bowel function.

Take in enough fiber each day.

- Males age 50 and younger should consume 38 grams of fiber each day.
- Females age 50 and younger should consume 25 grams of fiber each day.
- Males age 51 and older should consume 30 grams of fiber each day.
- Females age 51 and older should consume 21 grams of fiber each day.

In addition to helping with constipation, a high-fiber diet:

- Increases fullness, or satiety, which can help you with weight control.
- Protects the lining of the colon and promotes good bacteria growth in the colon.

Reduce your intake of low-fiber foods and replace them with high-fiber foods. Examples of low-fiber foods include white bread, high-fat and high-sugar snack foods such as desserts and cookies, processed foods such as potato chips and snack crackers, and most fast foods.

Increase your physical activity. Physical activity helps your bowel muscles move stool. Be as active as your health allows. Do not spend a lot of time sitting. Exercise 30 minutes or more every day. All activity, including housework, yardwork and extra walking, helps you. If you have chronic health issues or have not exercised in a long time, talk with your health care provider before you change your activity level.

Types of Fiber

There are two types of dietary fiber: soluble and insoluble. Both are in plant foods. And both help prevent constipation.

Insoluble fiber increases the amount of stool you have. It helps food pass more quickly through your intestines. And it helps the colon remove stool in less time.

Foods high in insoluble fiber include wheat bran, whole-grain breads and cereals, brown rice, and some fruits and vegetables such as apples and pears with the skin, broccoli and spinach.

Soluble fiber dissolves in water to form a gel-like material. This allows more water to stay in your stool, making the stool softer and easier to pass. Soluble fiber also may help with cholesterol.

Good sources of soluble fiber include oats, barley, navy beans, kidney beans, and some fruits and vegetables such as oranges, grapefruits, bananas, peaches, plums, and cooked carrots.

Adding High-Fiber Foods to Your Diet

Consuming the recommended amount of fiber each day can help prevent or relieve constipation. If you are not getting enough fiber, gradually increase the amount of fiber you take in each day. To do this, begin by adding one more high-fiber food every day for a week. Continue this pattern until you reach your goal for fiber intake.

Keep in mind that:

- You may have extra gas and bloating if you increase fiber too fast. By adding fiber gradually, you allow your digestive system to adjust to your new normal.
- As you increase fiber, it is important to drink the recommended amount of at least eight, 8-ounce glasses of fluid (64 ounces) a day.

Fruits and vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are good high-fiber choices. They may be cooked, dried or raw. At least 5 servings from this food group are recommended every day. The following are some suggestions for adding more fruits and vegetables into your diet.

- Eat salad made with dark green lettuce, kale, spinach, a variety of raw vegetables and sunflower seeds or nuts.
- Add extra vegetables to soups, pasta sauces, stews and casseroles. You also can chop or blend extra vegetables in a food processor for unique texture and taste.
- Add tomato, onion, cucumber, avocado and lettuce to sandwiches.
- Add dried fruits such as raisins or cranberries to cereals and salads.
- Make yogurt smoothies with unpeeled raw or frozen fruit.
- Substitute a piece of fruit for juice at breakfast. Fruit has more fiber than juice. It can help you feel full for a longer time.
- Eat dried or raw fruits or vegetables for a snack between your meals.
- Eat the skin of potatoes, summer squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and many fruits.
- Eat prunes, apples, cherries, pears, and peaches; drink prune juice. These all have sorbitol, a natural ingredient that acts like a mild laxative. It helps move stool through the body. Apple juice also acts like a laxative for some people.

Legumes

Legumes are good sources of fiber. They also are high in protein and low in fat. Examples include kidney, navy, black and pinto beans, peas, and lentils.

Some people have increased intestinal gas and discomfort after they eat beans. To help with this, gradually add beans to your diet by eating small servings more often. Consider taking an enzyme-based dietary supplement, such as Beano™ or BeanAssist™, when you eat beans.

- Add any kind of bean to soups, stews, chili, casseroles, and salads. Canned beans are an easy and quick way to increase your intake of beans.
- Use baked beans as a side dish.
- Add mashed beans to ground meat or put them on tortillas.
- Use hummus on crackers or as a dip for raw vegetables.

Nuts and nut butters

All nuts and nut butters are good sources of fiber. Examples of nut butters include almond, cashew and peanut butters.

- Eat whole-grain crackers or bread with peanut butter for a lunch or snack.
- Add nuts to vegetables, salads, hot cereal, pasta, rice, and casseroles.
- Use ground nuts to coat fish, poultry and cheese.
- Snack on dried fruit-and-nut mixes.
- Add nuts or nut butter to a breakfast smoothie.

Whole grains

Whole grains and foods made from them contain the essential parts and the natural ingredients of the entire grain seed. Whole grain cereals and breads usually are good sources of fiber.

Read the ingredient label to make sure the first ingredient is a whole grain such as whole- wheat flour. Look for each serving of whole-grain food to have 3 grams or more of fiber.

Add ground flax seed, unprocessed bran, oats or wheat germ to salad, hot cereal, yogurt, smoothies, stews, and soups.

When you buy foods with “added fiber” such as yogurt, bars or crackers, choose those with a whole-grain product listed as one of the first few ingredients. Many foods with added fiber contain inulin as the fiber source. Some people have bloating, cramping, gas or loose stools from eating foods containing inulin. It is better to get most of your fiber from whole foods.

The following are whole grains.

- Brown and wild rice
- Buckwheat
- Sorghum
- Bulgur
- Spelt

- Amaranth
- Millet
- Barley
- Wheat berries
- Flax meal
- Wheat germ
- Popcorn
- Flour and bread made with 100-percent whole wheat or rye
- Bran muffin
- Whole-grain tortilla
- Whole-wheat pasta
- Quinoa
- Oats
- Muesli
- Dry whole-grain cereal such as bran flakes, shredded wheat, and granola

High-Fiber Sample Menu

The following meal plan provides a total of 35 to 40 grams of fiber.

Breakfast

- 1 cup old fashioned oatmeal (2 or 3 grams of fiber)
 - 2 Tbsp. raisins (1 gram of fiber)
 - 2 Tbsp. chopped almonds or pecans (1 or 2 grams of fiber)
- 1 cup low-fat milk (0 grams of fiber)
- 1 pear (4 grams of fiber for small pear, 6 grams of fiber for large pear)

Lunch

- Sandwich with 2 slices whole-grain bread (4 to 6 grams of fiber)
 - 2 ounces turkey (0 grams of fiber)
 - Lettuce and tomato (1 gram of fiber)
- 2 cups chopped salad **or** 1 cup vegetable soup (2 to 3 grams of fiber)
 - 1 Tbsp. salad dressing (0 grams of fiber)
- 1 cup watermelon chunks (2 grams of fiber)
- Glass of iced tea (0 grams of fiber)

Dinner

- Bean burrito with 1 whole-grain tortilla, ½-cup refried beans, 3 ounces ground beef, shredded lettuce, tomatoes and black olives (7 grams of fiber)
- ½ cup brown rice (2 to 3 grams of fiber)
- 1 to 2 ounces tortilla chips with salsa (1 to 2 grams of fiber)
- 1 cup low-fat milk (0 grams of fiber)

Snack

- 2 to 3 cups light popcorn (2 grams of fiber)

or

- 1 cup yogurt with 1 cup blueberries (4 grams of fiber)

Children under the age of three should not eat nuts, dried fruits or popcorn. These foods can cause children to choke.

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