

# Dietary Management of Constipation

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## What is constipation?

Constipation is when you have difficulty passing stools. Common features of constipation include:

- Having less than 3 bowel movements per week
- Straining or difficulty passing stools
- Having hard or lumpy stools
- The feeling of incomplete stool evacuation

## What causes constipation?

There are many different causes of constipation. For some people, there may be more than one reason they have constipation. The following are some of the more common causes of constipation:

- Consuming too little fibre in the diet
- Not consuming enough fluids during the day
- Having too little physical activity or immobility
- Taking certain medications that can have constipation as a side-effect (e.g. pain medications, diuretics, iron supplements, etc.)
- Certain medical conditions that can cause constipation
- Overuse of laxative medications

If you are not sure what is causing your constipation, a discussion with your health care provider can often help you to determine the underlying cause.

In some cases, there may be no clear reason for the constipation. When there is longer-term constipation without a clear cause, this is sometimes called 'functional' constipation.

## Your diet and constipation

Making changes to your diet may help to improve your constipation. The following information includes general dietary recommendations for constipation.

# Fibre

Consuming enough fibre in your diet can help to prevent or manage constipation. One of the first things to review if you have constipation, is whether you are consuming enough fibre in your diet.

## *What is fibre?*

Fibre is a non-digestible carbohydrate found in plant foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds, and whole grains. Fibre can add bulk to your stool, creating larger and softer stools that pass more easily through your digestive system. Consuming enough fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds, and whole grains in your diet can help optimize your fibre intake for constipation management.

## *How much fibre do I need?*

The amount of fibre in food is measured in grams (g). As a general guideline, it is recommended that women aim to consume about 25g of fibre per day, and men aim for about 38g of fibre per day.

## *How do I make sure that I am consuming enough fibre?*

The **Eat Well Plate** model from Canada's Food Guide provides a visual guide of how much fruit, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds, and whole grains to consume at your meals. Following this visual guide can help you reach your recommended fibre requirements for the day.

## Eat Well Plate



Visit: [Canada.ca/FoodGuide](https://Canada.ca/FoodGuide)

# Using the Eat Well Plate to help ensure enough fibre at meals

## Vegetables and Fruits



*Include vegetables and fruits at meals.  
\*Vegetables and fruits are an excellent source of fibre*

## Protein Foods

*Include plant-based protein foods such as nuts, seeds, beans, peas and lentils once a day or more.  
\*Plant-based protein foods are an excellent source of fibre.*



## Whole Grain Foods

*Include whole grain foods at meals e.g. whole oats or oatmeal, whole grain brown or wild rice, quinoa, whole grain breads/cereals/pasta.  
\*Whole grain foods contain more fibre than refined grain foods*



## Tips to increase high fibre foods in your diet

### Vegetables and fruits:

- ✓ include more salads or raw vegetables during the day
- ✓ add vegetables to your stir-fry, soups, or sauces
- ✓ include baked, steamed or boiled vegetables at supper
- ✓ add fruit to cereals or smoothies (e.g. berries, banana)
- ✓ buy pre-cut fruit for snacking
- ✓ add fruit or dried fruit to salads e.g. sliced pears, apple, strawberries, raspberries, dried cranberries



### Plant-based protein foods:

- ✓ include nuts and seeds as a snack e.g. trail mix with dried fruit during the day
- ✓ add nuts and seeds to salads
- ✓ add lentils to a soup, stew or casserole
- ✓ try a bean salad, lentil and rice pilaf, or a bowl of vegetarian chili for lunch
- ✓ for great bean and lentil recipes, visit the Ontario Bean Growers website: [ontariobeans.on.ca](http://ontariobeans.on.ca)



### Whole grain foods:

- ✓ look for the word 'whole' at the beginning of the ingredient list for grain products e.g. whole oats, whole-wheat flour, whole-grain corn, whole-grain brown rice, and whole rye.
- ✓ substitute a whole-grain product for a refined grain product e.g.
  - whole-wheat bread instead of white bread
  - brown rice instead of white rice
- ✓ try whole-wheat pasta
- ✓ try oatmeal or another high fibre cereal for breakfast
- ✓ use whole grains in mixed dishes e.g. barley in vegetable soup or stews, and bulgur wheat in a casserole or stir-fry



## Using food labels to help choose high fibre foods

Consuming enough fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds, and whole grains in your diet is an important step to ensuring adequate fibre intake.

You can also read food labels to help you select high fibre foods for your diet. The following are common **fibre claims** and what they mean.

Fibre claims found on food labels	What the claim means
<b>A source of fibre</b>	The food product contains at least <i>2 grams of fibre</i> per serving
<b>A high source of fibre</b>	The food product contains at least <i>4 grams of fibre</i> per serving
<b>An excellent source of fibre</b>	The food product contains at least <i>6 grams of fibre</i> per serving



When you are shopping, look for food choices that are labelled as either **a source**, **a high source**, or **an excellent source of fibre** to help you boost your daily fibre intake.

### The Nutrition Facts Table

The Nutrition Facts Table is located on the label of most packaged foods, and lists the amount of many nutrients found in the food, including fibre. The fibre amount will be listed as grams (g) per serving of the food product. You can use the Nutrition Facts Table to help determine whether a food product is high in fibre.

**TIP:** Refined or highly processed grain products often contain less than 2g fibre per serving. When choosing grain products such as breads, baked products, pasta or rice, look for whole grain products with 2 grams of fibre or more. When choosing cereals, look for whole grain cereals with 4 grams of fibre or more.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving size: 1 slice (39g)	
Amount	% Daily value
<b>Calories</b> 90	
<b>Fat</b> 1.5g	2%
Saturated 0.4g	2%
+ Trans 0g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 0mg	
Sodium 195mg	8%
<b>Carbohydrate</b> 15g	5%
<b>Fibre</b> 4g	16%
<b>Sugars</b> 2g	
<b>Protein</b> 4g	



# Drinking plenty of fluids daily

Consuming enough fluid in your diet is important to help keep you hydrated and to help prevent constipation.

## *How much fluid should I consume?*

As a general recommendation, it is recommended to consume *at least* 6 - 8 cups of fluid a day. Your dietitian may have more specific recommendations for your particular situation.

## *What type of fluids should I drink?*

Fluids such as regular or carbonated water, teas, herbal tea, coffee, milk or unsweetened milk alternative beverages, fruit juice (in moderation), vegetable juice and soups are some examples of healthy fluids. Drinking fluids that are warm or hot may also help with constipation.



# Fruit and constipation

In addition to being high in fibre, some fruits are also high in polyols, which can have a laxative effect in the bowel.

If you have constipation, try to include fruits that are high in polyols due to the additional laxative benefit of these fruits.

Fruits that are high in polyols		
✓ apple	✓ apricot	✓ blackberries
✓ cherries	✓ nectarine	✓ peach
✓ pear	✓ plum	✓ prune



## High polyol fruit juices or nectars

Consuming high polyol fruit juice or nectar (e.g. 1-2 glasses per day) can also be helpful to manage constipation. While juices and nectars do not contain as much fibre as whole fruit, the combination of fluid and polyols in the juice/nectar can often provide a laxative effect. The following are fruit juices/nectars that are high in polyols.

- Prune juice or nectar
- Pear juice or nectar
- Peach juice or nectar
- Apricot juice or nectar



# High fibre boosters for constipation

Another option to increase your fibre intake if needed, is to use a **high fibre booster**. The following high fibre boosters can be added to your breakfast (or another meal if you prefer) to help increase your fibre intake if you need it. Try only 1 fibre booster per day. Start slowly and gradually increase the amount of fibre booster as needed to allow your body to get used to it. Adding too much fibre too soon may cause some bloating, gas or abdominal discomfort.

**Fibre boosters** can be added to various breakfast foods such as:

- Hot cereals (e.g. oatmeal, porridge)
- Cold cereals
- Yogurt
- Smoothies or shakes



## Fibre Boosters

**All Bran Buds cereal**

Start with 2 tablespoons (30ml) (provides 5 grams of fibre).  
You can increase up to 4 tablespoons (60ml) (provides 10 grams of fibre) as tolerated.



**All Bran cereal**

Start with 4 tablespoons (60ml) (provides 4 grams of fibre).  
You can increase up to ½ cup (120ml) (provides 8 grams of fibre) as tolerated.



**Flaxseed (whole or ground)**

Start with 1 tablespoon (15ml) (provides 2 grams of fibre).  
You can increase up to 2 - 3 tablespoons (30-45ml) (provides 4 - 6 grams of fibre) as tolerated.



**Chia seeds**

Start with 1 tablespoon (15ml) (provides 4 grams of fibre).  
You can increase up to 2 tablespoons (30ml) (provides 8 grams of fibre) as tolerated.



**Wheat or oat bran**

Start with 2 tablespoons (30ml) (provides 3 grams of fibre).  
You can increase to 4 tablespoons (60ml) (provides 6 grams of fibre) as tolerated.



*When taking a fibre booster, make sure to drink at least 1 cup (250ml) of fluid as well (e.g. water, tea, coffee, unsweetened juice, milk/milk beverage alternative) to help you tolerate the fibre, and also to help the fibre work better to improve constipation.*

## ***Fibre Lax recipe***

The following recipe is sometimes used to help with constipation

**Combine the following ingredients in a bowl:**

- 1/2 cup of applesauce
- 1/2 cup All Bran
- 1/4 cup prune juice



*Stir until ingredients are thoroughly mixed. Store in the refrigerator for up to a week. Take ¼ cup daily or as tolerated.*

## **Fibre supplements**

For some people, using a fibre supplement may help relieve constipation. Fibre supplements (often called bulk-forming laxatives) such as Metamucil or Benefibre are available over-the-counter at pharmacies. The fibre in these supplements absorbs water in the intestine, which can help to make the stool softer and relieve constipation. These types of supplements generally come in either a powder or tablet form. It is important to drink enough fluid when taking these supplements (follow the directions on the product label). If you have questions about these supplements please talk to your dietitian, pharmacist or physician.



### ***Increase fibre gradually in your diet***

When making changes to your diet to increase your fibre intake, whether using food and/or fibre supplements, it is recommended that you start by gradually increasing the fibre in your diet. If fibre is increased too quickly or too much is consumed at once, some people may notice symptoms of increased intestinal gas, abdominal bloating or abdominal discomfort. For some people, it may take some time for the digestive system to adjust to a higher fibre intake. If you notice any of these symptoms, and they are uncomfortable, try introducing fibre more slowly in your diet or try different high fibre foods to see if they are better tolerated.



## Physical activity

A lack of physical activity can sometimes lead to constipation. Getting enough physical activity is important to help keep the bowels moving and to help manage constipation. A brisk walk for 30 minutes 3 - 4 times a week is a good place to start. If you are a senior with mobility issues, physical activity may be more difficult. If this is the case, please talk with your health care team to help find physical activities that would be good for you.

## Medications and constipation

If you are taking routine medications, it may be helpful to talk with your physician or pharmacist about whether any of these medications are contributing to your constipation.

There are also medications available that can help relieve constipation. If your constipation continues despite the dietary/lifestyle changes suggested in this hand-out, you can talk with your physician or pharmacist. They will be able to advise you which medications are most appropriate to help manage your constipation.

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Registered Dietitian: \_\_\_\_\_

905-378-4647 ext. \_\_\_\_\_