



# Dietary Management of Constipation

## What is constipation?

Constipation is when you have infrequent bowel movements (less than 3 times per week). Symptoms of constipation can include:

- Straining or difficulty passing stools
- Painful bowel movements
- Hard, dry or small stools
- Feeling bloated

## What causes constipation?

There are many possible causes of constipation. They can include:

- Some medications
- Diet that is low in fibre
- Dehydration
- Overuse of laxatives
- Lack of physical activity
- Some diseases
- Problems with the function of the bowels

To best manage constipation, the actual cause of the constipation should be identified and addressed.

In some cases, diet changes may help with constipation. The following are general dietary/lifestyle tips that may help improve constipation. If your constipation is caused by a disease or problems with function of the bowels, then you may need to follow more specific dietary guidelines. Please talk to your dietitian if this is the case.

# General Dietary/Lifestyle Tips to Manage Constipation



## 1. Get enough fibre in your diet

### *What is Fibre?*

Dietary fibre is a part of food that we cannot digest. Fibre is found only in foods of plant origin, such as grains, cereals, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds. Meat, fish, milk and milk products do not contain any dietary fibre.

### *Types of Fibre*

There are two types of fibre: **soluble** and **insoluble** fibre. **Soluble** fibre absorbs water, creating a bulky and soft gel-like mass in the intestines which helps to promote bowel movements. **Insoluble** fibre does not absorb water but adds a lot of bulk, creating larger and softer stools that move more easily through your intestines. Including both types of fibre in your diet is important to manage constipation.

### *How Much Fibre Do I Need?*

Women should aim for about 25g of fibre per day and men should aim for about 38g of fibre per day.

### *How much fibre is in foods?*

The easiest way to find out how much fibre is in foods is to look at the nutrition label of the food item. On the label, it should tell you how many grams of fibre are in a serving size of that food item.

### *Tips to eat enough fibre*

- Include a minimum of 7 servings of fruits and vegetables a day (one serving is ½ cup or 1 medium sized fruit).
- Include a minimum of 5 servings of whole grain products a day. Choose whole grain breads and cereals more often. Try to pick cereals that have 4g of fibre or more per serving and try to pick whole grain breads that contain 2g of fibre or more per slice.
- Try using meat alternatives such as legumes, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds to increase the fibre in your diet.
- Sprinkle high-fibre cereal, ground flax seed or natural wheat bran on your yogurt, soups or salads.
- Add dried fruits to cereals and salads.
- Slowly increase the fibre in your diet to allow your body to get used to it. Too much fibre too soon can cause bloating, gas and discomfort.

The foods in the table below are good sources of fibre. Use this table to help you include high fibre foods in your diet.

<b>A Very High Source (more than 6 grams of fibre/serving)</b>	<b>Serving Size</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High fibre bran cereal (All Bran®, Bran Buds®, 100% Bran®, check labels for other cereals)</li> <li>• Legumes (dried peas, beans, lentils), kidney beans, lima beans, baked beans, green peas</li> <li>• Dates, dried</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ¾ cup</li> <li>• 1 cup</li> <li>• 4 large</li> </ul>
<b>A High Source (4-6 grams of fibre/serving)</b>	<b>Serving Size</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pear with skin</li> <li>• Sweet Potato</li> <li>• Figs, dried</li> <li>• Prunes</li> <li>• Apricots, dried</li> <li>• Raspberries</li> <li>• Pasta, whole wheat</li> <li>• Barley, cooked</li> <li>• Blueberries</li> <li>• Brussels sprouts, cooked</li> <li>• Bran Flakes®, Corn Bran®, Raisin Bran®</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 medium</li> <li>• ½ cup</li> <li>• 5</li> <li>• 7</li> <li>• 8</li> <li>• ½ cup</li> <li>• 1 cup</li> <li>• 1 cup</li> <li>• ½ cup</li> <li>• ½ cup</li> <li>• ¾ cup</li> </ul>
<b>A Source (2-4 grams of fibre/serving)</b>	<b>Serving Size</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole wheat, multigrain bread</li> <li>• Whole wheat pita bread</li> <li>• Brown rice, cooked</li> <li>• Baked potato with skin</li> <li>• Nuts (almonds, walnuts, peanuts)</li> <li>• Peanut butter</li> <li>• Sesame seeds</li> <li>• Orange, banana, kiwi, nectarine, peach, apple with skin</li> <li>• Strawberries</li> <li>• Most vegetables</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 slice</li> <li>• ½ pita</li> <li>• 1 cup</li> <li>• 1 medium</li> <li>• ¼ cup</li> <li>• 2 tbsp</li> <li>• 2 tbsp</li> <li>• 1 medium</li> <li>• 1 cup</li> <li>• ½ cup</li> </ul>



## 2. Drink plenty of fluids daily

Dehydration can be one of the causes of constipation. It is important that you are drinking enough fluids daily to promote regular bowel movements.

*How much fluid should I consume?*

As a general recommendation, females should drink about 9 cups of fluid a day, and males should drink about 12 cups of fluid a day.

*What type of fluids should I drink?*

Fluids such as water, fruit and vegetable juices, soups, and decaffeinated or herbal teas are some examples of healthy fluids. Drinking fluids that are warm or hot may also help with constipation. Alcohol and caffeine-containing beverages (i.e. regular tea/coffee, colas) can contribute to dehydration and therefore should be limited/avoided if you have constipation.



## 3. Increase your 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.



## 4. Try stewed prunes or prune juice

Prunes (dried plums) can have a laxative effect which can help improve constipation for some people. Try 125 - 250ml of hot prune juice a day or include stewed prunes in your diet. Large amounts of prunes may cause

bloating and gas for some people; therefore it is best to start with a smaller amount and then increase as tolerated.

The following are recipes that you can use that may help with constipation:

### **Fruit Lax**

- pitted dates (1/2 cup)
- prune nectar (1 1/4 cups)
- figs (1/2 cup)
- raisins (3/4 cup)
- pitted prunes (1/2 cup)

*Simmer dates and prune nectar until dates are very soft. Put date mixture in a food processor and add figs, raisins and prunes. Blend to a smooth paste. Store in the refrigerator. Use on toast, crackers, ice cream etc.*

Source: BC Care Agency, Care & Research (<http://www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/hfile68l.stm>)

### **Fibre Lax**

- 2 cups of applesauce (unsweetened applesauce)
- 2 cups all bran
- 1 cup prune juice

*Combine ingredients in bowl. Stir until ingredients are thoroughly mixed. Store in the refrigerator. Take 1/4 cup daily or as tolerated.*

## **5. 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.



## 6. Medications and Constipation

You may want to talk with your physician or pharmacist about whether any medications you are taking are possibly contributing to your constipation.

There are also prescription medications available that can help relieve constipation. If your constipation continues despite the dietary/lifestyle changes suggested in this hand-out, then you may want to talk to your physician about whether to try a prescription medication.

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

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Produced by Dietitians of the Niagara Health System, 2008