



**University
Hospitals Sussex**
NHS Foundation Trust

Constipation

Accident and emergency

Patient information

How your bowels work

When you eat, your stomach and intestines absorb nutrients and water from food. What is left becomes waste, forming solid lumps called stool (poo).

Muscles in your intestines push the stool through your bowel to your rectum (the end of your bowel), where it is stored until you go to the toilet.

What is constipation?

Constipation happens when it becomes difficult to pass stool or when bowel movements (doing a poo) become less frequent than usual.

You may be constipated if:

- Your bowel movements are less regular than normal
- Your stool is hard, dry, or painful to pass.

Constipation is a common issue that can affect people of all ages. It becomes more frequent as we get older. This may be due to eating and drinking less, being less active, or finding it harder to get to a toilet. Older adults are also more likely to take medications or have health conditions that can affect the bowel. People in hospital are particularly at risk.

What is normal?

You do not need to go to the toilet every day to be 'normal'. Bowel habits vary between people.

Most people have a bowel movement between three times a day and three times a week.

A normal stool should be, soft, well-formed and easy to pass.

Signs that something is not right

If your bowel habits change (for example, if you start going more often, have looser or runnier poo, see blood in your poo, or feel abdominal pain) speak to your GP.

Common causes of constipation

Constipation can have many causes, including:

- Low fibre intake (not enough fruit, veg, or whole grains)
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Lack of exercise
- Ignoring the urge to go to the toilet
- Poor toilet access or mobility issues
- Certain medications, such as: Codeine (painkillers), Antidepressants, Diuretics (water tablets), Iron supplements
- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Toilet difficulties, such as using a bedpan or commode
- Emotional factors, such as stress, anxiety, or grief
- Medical conditions, such as diabetes, stroke, Parkinson's disease, bowel or nerve disorders.

What problems does constipation cause?

Constipation can lead to:

- Pain when passing stool
- Bloating, stomach cramps, or sluggishness
- Piles (haemorrhoids): swollen veins in the back passage (anus)
- Faecal impaction, when poo blocks the bowel (can cause confusion, pain, and problems urinating).

It may also affect the bladder by:

- Putting pressure on the urethra
- Weakening the pelvic floor muscle.

How do I prevent or treat constipation?

Try the following steps:

1. Increase physical activity. Move more if you are able. Even short walks can help.

2. Make toilet use easier. Use a raised toilet seat or handrails if needed.

3. Practice good toilet habits

- Sit on the toilet for 3–5 minutes every morning, ideally after breakfast.
- Do not strain.
- Lean forward slightly, with elbows on knees and feet flat on the floor (or on a small footstool).

4. Drink more fluids

Aim for about 2 litres of fluids a day.

Include clear fluids like water, fruit juice, and vegetable soup.

5. Eat more fibre

- Increase fruits, vegetables, wholemeal bread, pasta, and rice.
- Aim for at least 5 portions of fruit and veg daily.
- Increase fibre and fluids gradually to avoid wind or stomach pain.

6. Consider laxatives (if needed)

If you are still constipated after making these changes, talk to your pharmacist or GP. Laxatives can help, but should be used only with professional advice.

Need more help?

- **NHS Website.** Trusted health information: www.nhs.uk
- **GUTS UK.** Information about digestive health: www.gutscharity.org.uk
- Pharmacist or GP, for ongoing symptoms or treatment advice

General support

For general medical advice please use the NHS website, the NHS 111 service, walk-in-centres, or your GP.

There are walk-in and urgent treatment services at Brighton Station, Crawley Urgent Treatment Centre, Lewes Victoria Hospital, Horsham Minor Injuries Unit and Bognor Regis War Memorial Hospital.

**Today's research is tomorrow's treatments.
That's why UHSx is proud to be a research-active Trust.**

Find out how you can get involved. Visit our website
**[www.uhsussex.nhs.uk/research-and-innovation/
information-for-patients-and-public](http://www.uhsussex.nhs.uk/research-and-innovation/information-for-patients-and-public)**
or scan the QR code



This information is intended for patients receiving care
in Brighton & Hove or Haywards Heath.

Ref. number: 924.2 Publication date: 08/2025 Review date: 08/2028

© University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust Disclaimer:
The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is in no way
intended to replace professional clinical advice by a qualified practitioner.

