

Can't Let It Go...



By Dr Quah Hak Mien

Mrs J. came to my clinic with a box of cake one Friday morning, smiling broadly. She was going to visit her daughter in the USA to attend her graduation ceremony. Things were not so cheerful three to four years ago.

Her 19-year-old daughter, Ms J., was then suffering from severe constipation, and it had been so for many years. She had seen many doctors and specialists. She was put on many medications including strong laxatives. Nothing was working. They were literally at the end of their tethers when they brought Ms J. to see me.

What causes constipation?

Constipation is a very common problem. Most of us probably had it before. Constipation means difficulty in passing motion, or a need to strain excessively. Struggling to pass hard, pellet-like stools or irregular bowel habits are also symptoms of constipation. Frequent constipation can be miserable.

Brief periods of constipation are normal, and many people have experienced it, especially when travelling. Certain medications like cough mixtures, painkillers and iron supplements can also cause constipation. Sometimes, constipation may be due to other medical conditions like thyroid disease, stroke or Parkinson's disease. More serious causes of constipation may even indicate colon cancer.

How is constipation treated?

I checked through Ms J.'s thick pile of medical records carefully. Her previous doctors had already done many tests. Her colonoscopy was normal. She did not have colon cancer or any serious underlying medical conditions. I listened patiently as Mrs J. described to me her daughter's diet and lifestyle.

An important task of the doctor is to identify the cause of constipation and to treat it specifically. It is not just about prescribing laxatives. Many patients with constipation can in fact be successfully treated.

Ms J. had not been eating much vegetables and fruits in her meals. I instructed her to take additional fibre. Foods high in fibre include vegetables and fruits, bran, wholemeal bread and unpolished rice. Everyone should eat a well-balanced diet regularly. I also encouraged her to restart her dancing classes which she used to enjoy but had to stop because of her heavy schoolwork. Exercise is also helpful for the proper working of the bowels. I started her on medication to improve her digestion. But I stopped all her laxatives.

There is no fixed number of times per day you need to visit the bathroom for bowel movement. It is different from person to person. Anything from three times a day to three times a week is still considered normal. You don't actually need to have bowel movement at least once a day. This false belief may lead to the unnecessary use of laxatives.

Ms J.'s condition began to improve. By then, she was doing a lot more sports, including running and rollerblading. She was eventually taken off all medications six months later. When she was happily preparing to go to college in the USA, Mrs J. insisted that I prepare a detailed medical report for her in case she needs to see a doctor there. I did, but she never needed it.

Dietary and lifestyle changes are usually all that are required to prevent constipation. A balanced diet with enough fibre and plenty of fluids will go a long way in ensuring good health. Regular exercise is also beneficial, not just for the heart, but also for constipation!



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