

Dealing with CONSTIPATION



By Dr Quah Hak Mien

Constipation is a very common problem that most of us have probably experienced at some point in our lives. To most, constipation means difficulty in passing motion, or a need to strain excessively. Struggling to pass hard pellet-like stools or infrequent bowel habit are also symptoms of constipation. Frequent straining to pass motion may lead to other problems like piles and anal fissures.



What Causes Constipation?

Brief periods of constipation are normal and many people may have experienced it occasionally, especially when they are travelling or during National Service in-camp training. Common causes include a change in diet, insufficient fibre and water intake, and sedentary lifestyle. Constipation may also be exacerbated by repeatedly ignoring the urge to pass motion.

Bowel habits are determined by what you eat. Exercise is also helpful for the proper functioning of the colon.

Certain Medications Can Cause Constipation

Medications like cough syrups, painkillers and iron supplements can cause or worsen constipation. If you have constipation after taking a new medication, do check with your doctor.

Sometimes, constipation may be due to other medical conditions like thyroid disease, stroke or Parkinson's disease. More serious causes of constipation include growths or areas of narrowing in the colon due to colon cancer.

When to Seek Help?

If you have persisting constipation as well as any of the conditions listed below, it may be indicative of a more serious underlying health problem:

- Change in bowel habit
- Fever
- Blood in the stools
- Weight loss
- Low blood count
- A hard lump in the tummy
- Family member with colorectal cancer

Seek your doctor's advice should you

suffer from any of the above symptoms. In particular, if a person aged 50 years and above experience an onset of constipation, colorectal cancer is a possible concern, and I would recommend that this person see his doctor for a check-up. Colorectal cancer is one of the most common cancers in Singapore. Your doctor may recommend a colonoscopy, performed by a specialist to check your large intestines internally before the treatment of your constipation.

Do you know?

- More than 1 in 10 persons in Singapore have constipation.
- There is no definite number of times you need to visit the bathroom to have a bowel movement. It varies from person to person, ranging from three times a day to three times a week, which is considered normal.
- You don't actually need to have a bowel movement at least once a day. This false belief may lead to unnecessary use of laxatives.
- Not passing motion does not result in 'poisons' retaining inside the body.
- For a person with severe constipation, taking too much fibre can worsen the condition!

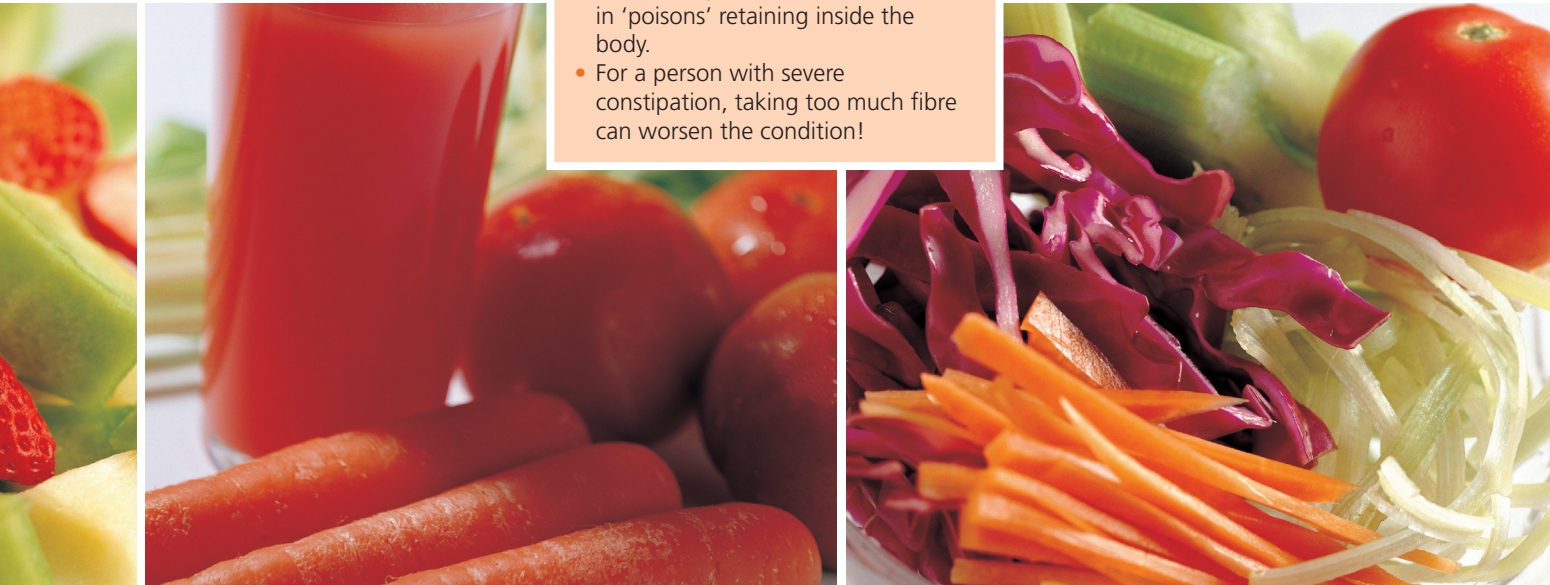
How is Constipation Treated?

The doctor should identify the cause of your constipation and treat it specifically. It is not just about prescribing laxatives. Many patients with constipation can be successfully treated. Everyone should eat a well-balanced diet regularly. If you have not been eating much vegetables and fruits in your meals, take additional fibre. Foods high in fibre include vegetables and fruits, as well as bran, wholemeal bread and unpolished rice.

Drink about eight glasses of water daily. Increase in exercise will also help bowel function. A short course of mild laxative may be required to regulate the bowel.

Doctor's Advice

Prevention is still the best. Dietary and lifestyle modification are usually all that are required to prevent constipation. A balanced diet with sufficient intake of 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!



Dr Quah Hak Mien is a specialist surgeon at Gleneagles Medical Centre. His clinical interest is in the treatment of colorectal diseases. His scope of work includes managing a wide range of conditions including colorectal cancer, diverticular disease, inflammatory bowel disease, perianal diseases like piles, anal fistula, and anal fissure. He also has clinical expertise in functional bowel disorders like irritable bowel syndrome, constipation and faecal incontinence.



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