

CONSTIPATION

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS:

- ❖ Hard stools, or stools that are difficult to pass
- ❖ Straining to have a bowel movement
- ❖ Abdominal bloating or discomfort
- ❖ Fewer than three bowel movements per week – what may be normal for one person may be constipation for another. The range of normal ranges from 3 bowel movements per day to three per week.

CAUSES:

- ❖ Pregnancy
- ❖ Inadequate fluid intake
- ❖ Poor fiber intake
- ❖ Age
- ❖ Lack of physical exercise
- ❖ Medications, including: narcotics, antidepressants, iron or calcium pills, diuretics (water pills)
- ❖ Under-active thyroid, and some other illnesses
- ❖ Rapid weight loss
- ❖ Ignoring the urge to pass stool

PREVENTION:

- ❖ Eat more fiber. High fiber foods include bean, bran, whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables.
- ❖ Drink plenty of liquids: 8 glasses per day. Limit caffeine and alcohol intake as these tend to dry out the digestive system.
- ❖ Regular exercise 20-30 minutes per day helps keep the digestive system healthy and active.
- ❖ Do not ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.

TREATMENT:

If constipation continues despite preventative measures, you may need to add a laxative. There are several different types:

- ❖ Bulk-forming agents: Agents that absorb water to help soften the stool. They must be used daily to work, but are the safest to use. These include fiber supplements such as Metamucil, Citrucel, Fibercon.
- ❖ Stool softeners: Add liquid content to the stool. Docusate (colace) and mineral oil are examples.
- ❖ Stimulants: Use a chemical to stimulate bowel activity, to help pass stool through the digestive system. Milk of magnesia, Dulcolax, & enemas are examples. Surgical bowel preps are some of the harsher stimulants.

Laxatives other than the bulk-forming agents are not meant for long term use and may cause medical problems if used for longer than a week. Even though many of these treatment options are available over the counter, it is important to discuss with your doctor which option is right for you. If you are pregnant, you should consult with your physician first.