

Food Nutrition for a healthy bowel

By OSCAR Hospitality Dietitian, Caitlin Dillon-Smith

What is constipation

Constipation is a common complaint and challenge, particularly for older adults. The prevalence of constipation increases with age and differs among settings. For long-term aged care residents, the prevalence of constipation is as high as 80%.

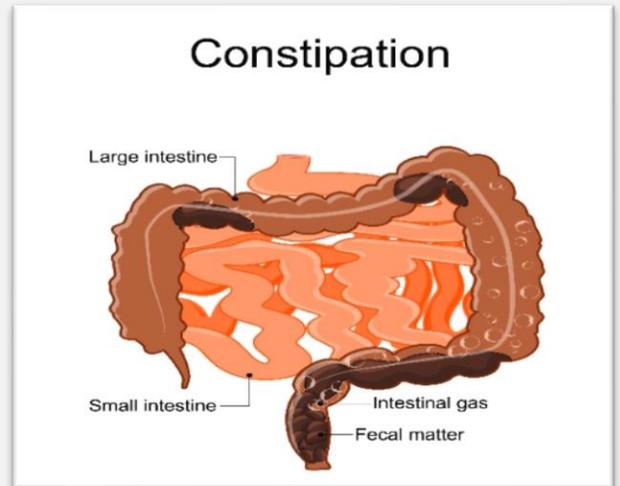
Constipation is the passing of hard, dry bowel motions (stools) that may be infrequent or difficult to pass.

Constipation can contribute to malnutrition as it leaves residents feeling uncomfortable, full and can reduce their appetite and therefore oral intake.

What causes constipation?

Constipation can be caused by both lifestyle and medical factors (and often a combination of these). These include:

- Change in routine – normal bowel motions depend on regular toileting routines
- Low-fibre diet – fibre adds bulk to the faeces, making it more easily pushed along the digestive tract.
- Insufficient water – the fibre in faeces will only plump up with water, so sufficient fluid intake is essential.
- Physical inactivity – lack of regular physical activity/exercise or being restricted in movement, due to age or disability
- A tendency to 'put off' going to the toilet – ignoring the urge to defecate means that more water will be extracted from the stools, making them difficult to pass.



- Medications – some are known to slow bowel movements (including narcotics, antidepressants and iron supplements).
- Medical Issues– in particular certain medical conditions (such as diabetes or nerve disease) and individuals who have a problem with their digestive tract (such as irritable bowel syndrome, diverticulitis or haemorrhoids)



Tips to promote a healthy bowel

Lifestyle-related prevention/treatments for constipation (outside of medications/laxatives) include:

- Increase fibre intake – A daily fibre intake of 25g for women and 30g for men (aged 19yrs and above) is recommended. Good sources of fibre include wholegrain cereals, fruits, vegetables and legumes.
- Increase fluids – fluids help to bulk our faeces. However, it is important to restrict the intake of diuretic drinks such as tea, coffee and alcohol. Adults should aim for a daily fluid intake of 30–35mL/kg body weight.
- Physical Activity – regular physical activity/exercise helps in improving bowel motility. People with a condition that affects mobility need to be as active as possible each day, as every little bit helps.
- Fibre supplements – these may be helpful if constipation persists. Always check with your doctor or dietitian before using them.



How much fibre is in foods?

Food	Portion Size	Fibre (grams)	Food	Portion Size	Fibre (grams)
Cereals			Vegetables		
Rolled oats	½ cup	4.5	Broccoli	100g	4.0
Cornflakes	30g	1.1	Corn	1 cob	5.9
Weet-bix	30g	3.3	Carrots	100g	3.0
Coco-pops	30g	0.4	Potato, skin on	100g	1.7
Psyllium Husk	1tbsp	2.2	Baked Beans	100g	5.0
Breads/Grains			Fruit		
White Bread	1 slice	1.0	Apple	1 medium	3.4
White high fibre bread	1 slice	1.5	Banana	1 medium	3.3
Wholemeal Bread	1 slice	2.0	Orange	1 medium	3.5
Brown rice, cooked	1 cup	1.5	Pear	1 medium	3.0
Wholemeal Pasta	1 cup	3.0	Canned fruit	1 cup	3.5
		7.9	Prunes	6 prunes	3.3

3 ways to increase daily fibre intake in aged care without significantly increasing food volume

It's important that 'every mouthful counts'. For the elderly that have a small appetite we need to get the most nutrients in, in as smaller quantity as possible:

- 1) Add 2 tablespoons of puree prunes on cereal at breakfast or in a milkshake
- 2) Add ½ tablespoon psyllium powder to milkshake, porridge, soup, yoghurt (check with doctor if this is appropriate first)
- 3) Include a piece of fresh fruit at both morning tea and afternoon tea



REFERENCES

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<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/constipation>

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Need help with improving a resident's bowel health?

This article was written by Caitlin Dillon-Smith, Oscar Hospitality dietitian.

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