



Managing constipation: Dietary advice for a healthy bowel

The advice in this leaflet is suitable only for people who are not at risk of malnutrition.

A score of 0-11 on the Mini Nutritional Assessment (MNA) or a score of 1 or more on the Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool (MUST) indicates that the person is malnourished or at risk of malnutrition. **For people who are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition**, consult Making the Most of Every Bite. This high-protein, high-calorie cookbook is available to view or download on www.hse.ie/nutritionsupports.

Follow the guidance for constipation on pages 16-17 of the cookbook.

See www.hseland.ie for a training module on MUST.

These resources were developed by HSE dietitians.

A healthy bowel habit is an important part of feeling well. Everyone has a different bowel habit and it is important to know what is normal for you. What seems 'normal' for one person may seem abnormal for someone else.

A healthy bowel habit ranges from three bowel movements a day to three a week.

What is constipation?

Constipation means irregular bowel movements or stools (poo) which are difficult to pass. If you experience any of the following, you may have constipation.

- Infrequent stools
- Straining or difficulty passing stools
- Incomplete emptying
- Hard or lumpy stools
- Taking a long time to pass a stool
- Needing to use manual manoeuvres to pass a stool

Various lifestyle factors can affect bowel health. These include diet, stress, alcohol, smoking, antibiotics, travel, or shift work. Simple changes to your lifestyle can make a big difference. These can help you to feel good from the inside out.

Tips to keep your bowel healthy

1. Eat high-fibre foods

Fibre or 'roughage' is an important part of a healthy diet. It helps to move food through the digestive system and prevent constipation. It also makes stools bulky and easier to pass.

A diet high in fibre can help to maintain a healthy weight, and lowers the risk of heart disease, diabetes and some cancers. See the section on fibre below for tips on including more fibre in your diet.

2. Stay hydrated

When you increase fibre in your diet, it is important to also increase the amount of fluid you drink. This helps prevent bloating and discomfort that can sometimes happen with an increased fibre intake. Fluid also adds weight to the stool making it softer and easier to pass. Aim to drink 8 to 10 cups (1.5 to 2 litres) of fluid every day.

3. Eat regular meals

Have a regular meal pattern and include lots of high-fibre options. The more regular your eating pattern, the more predictable your bowel habit will be.

4. Eat breakfast every day

Breakfast gives your digestive system a good start to the day. It is also a great opportunity to include fibre. Try porridge or a wholegrain breakfast cereal.

5. Relax when eating

Take time to sit and enjoy your meals. Eating quickly can cause you to gulp extra air. This can leave you feeling bloated and uncomfortable. Chew food well as this will kick-start the digestive process. Take time to relax each day as stress can negatively affect your digestive health.

6. Exercise every day

Physical activity helps the muscles in the bowel to contract and this can help your bowel habit. Regular physical activity promotes mental and physical health by relieving stress. It also reduces the risk of heart disease, diabetes and cancer.



7. Sit properly on the toilet

A slight squatting position can help your body to pass a stool. This relates to the shape of your gut (digestive system).

1. Bring your knees higher than your hips, perhaps using a small stool under your feet.
2. Lean forward and put your elbows on your knees.
3. Let your abdomen and tummy muscles relax and straighten your spine.



Make use of your body's natural reflexes. Go to the toilet within 30 minutes of eating your main meal, if possible. Try to relax and don't rush.

More about fibre

There are two types of fibre:

- Soluble fibre
- Insoluble fibre

You need to eat plenty of each type to keep your digestive system healthy.

Soluble fibre softens the stool. It is found mainly in oats, barley, fruit, and pulses (beans, peas and lentils).

Insoluble fibre adds bulk (weight) to the stool. Get it from wholegrain bread, cereals, pasta, brown rice, and the skins of fruit and vegetables.

Adults need 25g of fibre every day. Only one in five adults in Ireland meet this target.

Increase your fibre intake:

- ✓ Choose porridge or a wholegrain breakfast cereal in the morning.
- ✓ Add fruit to low-fat yogurt as a mid-morning snack.
- ✓ Have a green salad or vegetable soup at lunchtime.
- ✓ Have a low-fat smoothie or fruit salad as a mid-afternoon snack.
- ✓ Choose wholemeal bread, rice and pasta instead of white.
- ✓ Include vegetables or pulses (peas, beans, lentils) with your main meal.
- ✓ Read food labels. High-fibre foods contain more than 6g of fibre per 100g. Foods that contain less than 3g of fibre per 100g are low in fibre.



Important:

Introduce high-fibre foods into your diet slowly. A sudden change or increase may cause tummy upsets.

Vary the type of fibre you eat. Insoluble fibre can cause bloating and pain for some people, so some people find it is easier to take soluble fibre.

Keep hydrated

Drink more while exercising or in hot weather. Look at the colour of your urine to check if you are drinking enough. Urine should be pale yellow in colour. If it is darker, this is a sign that you need to drink more.

Water is best to hydrate your body. Add a slice of lemon or lime to give it flavour, or sugar-free squash. Other options are low-fat milk and diluted fruit juice.

Tea, coffee and many fizzy drinks contain caffeine. Caffeine makes your body lose fluid and can affect bowels also. Limit your intake of these drinks.

Exercise

Everyone over 18 years of age should get at least 30 minutes of moderate activity, five days a week. Moderate activity raises your breathing and heart rate but you are still able to hold a conversation. Examples include brisk walking, jogging, running, dancing, and swimming. Playing tennis, golf or football also counts as moderate activity.

Choose activities you enjoy and make a plan to include them in your weekly routine.

Consult your doctor before starting to exercise if you have been inactive for a long time.

Natural relief for constipation

If you experience constipation, some of the following may help.

- 50mls of prune juice twice daily
- High-fibre fruit mixture:
Combine one cup of prunes, one cup of raisins and one cup of dates.
Soak the fruit mixture overnight in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup orange juice and $\frac{2}{3}$ cup prune juice.
Blend in a blender for 1-2 minutes.
Use the mixture as a spread for toast, or mix it into hot cereal or plain yoghurt.
Store the mixture in the fridge for up to two weeks or freeze it.
- Add linseeds (flaxseed) to your daily routine, along with some extra fluid. See the table on the next page of this guide for help finding the right dosage for you.



If you have bowel problems, or you want more information on anything in this leaflet, speak to your GP. Or ask for referral to a dietitian to receive individualised nutritional advice.

References: Mini Nutritional Assessment (MNA) available at <https://www.mna-elderly.com/>
Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool (MUST) available at www.bapen.org.uk
Irish Nutrition and Dietetics Institute, 2013
American College of Gastroenterology, 2014
British Dietetic Association, 2013
Linseeds guideline developed by Aisling Snedker RD (UK), BSc(hons), PGDip Diet, PGcert SEN, FAETC, MINDI & BDA Clinical & Sports Nutrition Dietitian. Edited with kind permission June 2014

Introducing flaxseed or linseed to your diet

Linseed and flaxseed is the same thing. It is recommended that you use milled or ground seed instead of the whole seeds, if you have diverticular disease or diverticulitis.

The seeds can be mixed into yoghurt, pureed fruit, porridge, cereal, milk (or soya milk) and salads. It is important to drink plenty of fluids when using linseeds. Include an extra cup of fluid (at least 150ml) for every 2-3 teaspoons of linseeds.

Get the dose right

You are at the right dose when you have a bowel movement every 1-2 days and the stools are big, soft and comfortable to pass (that is, you don't need to strain).

You may experience an increase in the amount of wind you pass. When this starts happening, continue with the same amount of seed and do not increase the amount you are taking each day.

If bowel movements stop for any number of days, stop taking the linseed for two days. You can then introduce it again, starting with the lowest dose and increasing the amount each day, as before.

→ Use the table below as a guide to increase your use of linseed and to track your progress. To record the type of stool, refer to the number on the Bristol Stool Chart on the next page.

Day	Dose			Bowel movements		
	Breakfast	Evening meal	Before bed	Did you stool? (yes or no)	Type of stool? (e.g. 7)	Bloating? (yes or no)
1	2 teaspoons	0	0			
2	2 teaspoons	0	0			
3	2 teaspoons	0	2 teaspoons			
4	2 teaspoons	0	2 teaspoons			
5	2 teaspoons	2 teaspoons	2 teaspoons			
6	2 teaspoons	2 teaspoons	2 teaspoons			
7	3 teaspoons	2 teaspoons	2 teaspoons			
8	3 teaspoons	2 teaspoons	2 teaspoons			
9	3 teaspoons	3 teaspoons	2 teaspoons			
10	3 teaspoons	3 teaspoons	2 teaspoons			
11	3 teaspoons	3 teaspoons	3 teaspoons			
12	3 teaspoons	3 teaspoons	3 teaspoons			
13	4 teaspoons	3 teaspoons	3 teaspoons			
14	4 teaspoons	3 teaspoons	3 teaspoons			

Bristol Stool Chart

Type 1		Separate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass)
Type 2		Sausage-shaped but lumpy
Type 3		Like a sausage but with cracks on its surface
Type 4		Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft
Type 5		Soft blobs with clear-cut edges (passed easily)
Type 6		Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool
Type 7		Watery, no solid pieces. Entirely Liquid

Reference: Heaton, K W & Lewis, S J 1997, 'Stool form scale as a useful guide to intestinal transit time'. *Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology*, vol.32, no.9, pp.920 - 924.