

# Constipation



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Constipation is defined as unsatisfactory defecation resulting from infrequent bowel movements (less than 3 weekly), difficult stool passage, or both. Difficult stool passage includes straining to defecate, a sense of incomplete evacuation, hard/lumpy stools, prolonged time to defecation or a need for manual maneuvers to pass stool. Chronic constipation (CC) is defined as the presence of these symptoms for at least 3 months. When CC results in decreased quality of life, treatment should be considered.

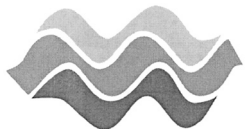
Chronic constipation is a common problem, affecting about 15% of North Americans. Women, those of lower socioeconomic status and the elderly are more likely to suffer with CC. Constipation is commonly associated with diabetes mellitus, hypothyroidism and is frequently reported during pregnancy. However, most constipated patients have no obvious cause to explain their symptoms. These patients are presumed to have an underlying problem of colon motor function.

When patients report so-called alarm symptoms such as rectal bleeding, weight loss, a family history of colon cancer or inflammatory bowel disease, new onset of constipation in the elderly or when anemia, positive fecal occult blood tests or

positive findings on physical exam are identified, diagnostic testing should be considered. Your doctor may recommend blood tests, x-rays or a colonoscopy, based upon your personal history. Obviously, all persons age 50 or older should be offered routine use of colon cancer screening tools (preferably colonoscopy). In patients with CC without alarm symptoms, we do not recommend the routine use of diagnostic testing. Instead, treatment of symptoms should be tried initially and diagnostic testing reserved for those patients who do not respond as expected.

Treatment should be individualized for patient age, duration and severity of symptoms, potential contributing factors and the patient's concerns and expectations. An increase in dietary fiber and water supplementation usually represents first line therapy. Numerous therapies for occasional constipation are available without a prescription including stool softeners, bulking agents and stimulant laxatives. Chronic constipation can be treated by your doctor with a variety of medications available by prescription including osmotic laxatives, tegaserod (Zelnorm) and lubiprostone (Amitiza). If you are suffering with constipation, see your doctor. Effective therapies are available. Remember to inform your doctor about any alarm symptoms you may be experiencing.

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