

blocked up!

this handout is about severe constipation and how to deal with it.

what:

severe constipation can cause pain, cramping, and feelings of fullness or heaviness in the belly and/or bottom.

even without these feelings, it can cause bloating (expansion and tightness of the belly), nausea, and loss of appetite. (sometimes people have bloating and nausea, and have to think carefully before they realize they are probably constipated.)

it can be caused by the gut slowing down, by the stools becoming too hard and dry, and/or by a pelvic muscle problem (too weak, or too spastic).

sometimes people notice accidental, uncontrollable "diarrhea" at the same time. this is caused by liquid stool leaking out around a severe blockage, and can happen to persons of any age.

sometimes people notice blood on the toilet paper or on the outside of the stool, usually caused by bleeding hemorrhoids (a common side effect of constipation). this goes away when the constipation is cured. but if you ever see large blood clots, or red toilet water, call your doctor.

warning: if the person develops fever, vomiting, or confusion (unusual speech, prolonged drowsiness, staggering, falling, or other alarming changes), **go directly to the emergency room** for evaluation. constipation can be health- and life-threatening!

how:

the function of the bowel is to remove water from the stool, so you don't get dehydrated. the longer the stool stays inside, the more water is recycled from it, and the more hard and dry it becomes.

normally, the bowel is a strong, muscular tube. but in severe constipation, with the bowel full of large "boulders," the bowel becomes stretched, thin, and weak.

even after emptying all the "boulders" out, the muscles need time (weeks to *months*) to get back in shape and regain strength. this is why severe constipation tends to occur over and over again!

these problems are worse when you have a problem with your nerves (for example, spinal cord injury) or muscles (for example, weak rectal or vaginal muscles).

who:

in babies and children, severe constipation occurs when dietary change or low fluid intake causes hard stools that are painful to pass. to avoid pain, the baby or child may start to hold it in. this makes the problem worse, because the retained stool gets even more hard and dry.

people who are sick or injured, or had surgery, often become dehydrated due to low intake and increased water losses. this causes dried-out, hard stools that are difficult to pass. some neurological diseases and injuries cause muscle weakness that results in blockage. hormone problems like thyroid disease and diabetes can also cause this.

when people take narcotic pain medicines, these slow down bowel function, causing the stool to dry out and become hard, while making the muscles "sleepy." this is a known side effect that does not go away and must be treated (or prevented) continuously throughout use of the medicine.

some people have low-level, chronic constipation all the time, with uncomfortable bowel movements. this doesn't cause the same crisis as severe constipation. these people may be more vulnerable to severe constipation, though.

chronic low-level constipation can be caused by individual variations in anatomy and metabolism, as well as by some medications and supplements. it doesn't mean you have to stop taking those medicine or supplements - but you do need to prevent severe constipation from developing, by drinking plenty of water, eating plenty of fiber, getting plenty of exercise, and treating early signs.

when:
treat it "daily and on day 3"!

summary of treatment:

daily: fiber supplement + stool softener + 2 liters of fluid (not caffeine or alcohol).

on day 3 of no bowel movement: fiber + softener + 2L fluids + stimulant laxative +/- osmotic laxative +/- lubricant

on day 4 of no bowel movement: fiber + softener + 2L fluids + magnesium citrate + enema if needed

on day 5 of no bowel movement: fiber + softener + 2L fluids + medical exam!

note: all of these treatments are over-the-counter (nonprescription), and most are generic or natural food items.

treatment details and dosages:

daily:

1. take a fiber supplement, about 20 grams per day (adult).

there are two kinds of fiber:

- "roughage" (insoluble fiber), which is scratchy and "scrubs" the bowel, like wheat bran and vegetables with their peels and skins.
- "soluble fiber," which forms a gel and soaks up water and fat*, like oat bran, psyllium seed, barley malt, and pectin. *technically, the gel absorbs bile acids, thereby reducing cholesterol.

most foods have both types of fiber - for example, "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." however, if you have chronic constipation, you'd probably benefit from a supplement in addition to food sources.

2. use a stool softener (not a laxative).

- 1/2 cup of prune juice nightly at bedtime. prune juice is high in the low-calorie fruit sugar *sorbitol*, which draws water into the stool.
- docusate, which is basically a safe detergent that stops the stools from hardening up in the bowel.

3. hydrate, hydrate, hydrate!

- imagine a 2-liter soda bottle. now imagine it filled with water. drink at least this much water (and other fluids) every single day.
- if you drink caffeine or alcohol, you'll need an extra liter of water a day, because caffeine and alcohol are natural diuretics (make you pee more).

on day 3:

1. if it is day 3 without a bowel movement, add a stimulant laxative.

stimulant laxatives cause contractions of the bowel muscle. this is helpful when the muscles are having trouble with hard, dry "boulders," and when the muscles are weak, or are sedated by pain medicines.

if you use a laxative *without* also using a stool softener and drinking plenty of water, you can get *worse* belly pain.

stimulant laxatives are **not for everyday use**. if you use them all the time, the bowel muscles can become "lazy" and won't work normally by themselves.

sometimes stimulant laxatives "work" right away, and sometimes they take 6-12 hours - it's very individual. to be safe, start in the morning, and be prepared to get to a bathroom quickly.

examples:

- senna, an herb in the sweet-pea family (generic, "Ex-Lax", "Smooth Move" tea, and other brands), also available combined with docusate softener.
12 years old to adult: 75 mg total over 24 hours, divided into two or three doses (for example, 25 mg three times per day until success).
children 6-11 years old, 20-50 mg total over 24 hours, divided into 2-3 doses.
children 2-5 years old, 5-15 mg total over 24 hours, divided into 2-3 doses.
- bisacodyl, an over-the-counter medicine (generic, "Dulcolax," "Correctol," "Carter's Little Pills").
12 years old to adult: 15 mg in a single dose.
children 6-11 years old: 5-10 mg in a single dose.
- castor oil, from the seeds of the castor plant, an herb in the spurge (poinsettia) family (generic).
12 years old to adult: 3 tablespoons in juice or water, one time (approx. 50 mL).
children 6-11 years old: 1-3 teaspoons in juice or water, one time (5-15 mL).

due to ill effects from prolonged use, the following laxatives were banned in 2003 by the FDA for use in new over-the-counter products:

- aloe vera, a desert plant similar to cactus:
12 years old to adult: 2 Tb of gel (approx 30 mL), three times over 24 hours (total, 6 Tb).
this remedy may be too strong for smaller kids.
- casacara sagrada, a tree in the alder buckthorn family:
i am unable to find dosing information for this medicine. since it is often considered to be very strong, needs to be properly prepared, and appears to be poorly standardized, i advise consulting an experienced herbalist for dosage information.

2. you may also add an "osmotic laxative."

this is basically a salt or a sugar that draws a lot of water into the bowel. it can liquefy the stool, so stay near a bathroom when you use it. don't forget to drink plenty of water with these laxatives. examples:

- magnesium hydroxide ("Milk of Magnesia", "PediaLax"):
12 years old to adult: 2-4 Tb, one time, or divided into 2 doses over 24 hours (30-60 mL, total 2400-4800 mg).
children 6-11 years old: 1-3 tablespoons, one time, or divided into 2 doses over 24 hours.
children 2-5 years old: 1-3 teaspoons, one time, or divided into 2 doses over 24 hours.
- magnesium sulfate (generic "Epsom salts"):
12 years old to adult: 1-2 tsp one time, or divided into 2 doses over 24 hours.
children 6-11 years old: half the adult dose.
- lactulose (generic, or "Kristalose"), a non-digestible milk sugar (similar to the sorbitol found in prune juice).
12 years old to adult: 2-4 Tb, one time, or divided into 2 doses over 24 hours.
children 2-11 years old: 2-4 tsp, one time, or divided into 2 doses over 24 hours.
- polyethylene glycol, also called PEG ("Miralax"):
12 years old to adult: drink 1 heaping Tb powder (17 grams) in a cup of water, once or twice in 24 hours.
children 2-11 years old: about half the adult dose, once or twice in 24 hours.
- glycerin, an oily syrup in a gel capsule or a preloaded, disposable bulb applicator (suppository).
there are adult, child, and baby-sized versions; use the appropriate size, one time: insert anally, then rest lying down for 30 minutes or until an urge is felt.

3. you may also add a lubricant.

a lubricant does *not* change the hardness of the stool, nor make the muscles work harder. it just "greases the skids."

- mineral oil (generic) is a non-digestible oil that coats the entire bowel. take a spoonful, and chase it with juice to wash the oily taste away. do not use it every day, because it can cause vitamin deficiency.
adults: 1 Tb one time.
children: 1 tsp one time.

note: "Phillip's M-O," formerly known as "Haley's M-O", is a mixture of Milk of Magnesia and mineral oil.

on day 4:

1. daily fiber and stool softener as usual, but no laxatives or lubricants.

2. now add the heavy artillery:

- magnesium citrate, also called "Mag Cit" (generic, and "Citroma"), a magnesium salt solution that liquefies the stool. stay near a bathroom all day. can work immediately or can take 6-12 hours - very individual.
adults: one bottle (ten ounces), one time.

3. add an enema if necessary:

if "Mag Cit" has not relieved the severe constipation, this is your last resort.

- i recommend buying premixed enema solution in a disposable squeeze bottle (generic, or "Fleet").
there are a lot of different kinds, including extra-volume ("Fleet Extra") and child-sized ("Pedia-Lax"). choose a plain "saline" solution (sodium phosphate) - not the mineral-oil or bisacodyl varieties.
- you can give the enema to yourself, or ask a helper to do it. ("with friends like these, who needs enemas?")
- either way, it may be easiest if you lie down on your back or side, on a towel to catch any drips.
- stay lying down for 30 minutes after all the liquid has been squirted in, or until you feel an urge.
- please do not use an enema more than once.

on day 5:

if fiber, stool softener, laxatives and lubricant, "Mag Cit" and an enema have not fixed the problem, you need a medical exam, probably including an x-ray, to see what's going on in there.



aftercare:

after an episode of severe constipation, the bowel muscles need time to recover.

1. continue using a daily fiber supplement (20 grams), a daily stool softener (not a laxative), and at least 2 liters of fluid every day. prevent the formation of "boulders"!

2. treating constipation is hard on your normal bowel flora. support them with a probiotic supplement of live bacterial cultures.

examples:

- "Nancy's" or "Stoneyfield" brand yogurt or kefir (may be cow or soy milk based), 1 cup per day. both of these brands contain live acidophilus, bulgaricus, casei, rhamnosus, thermophilus, and bifidus cultures that have been found to improve gut health.
- traditionally fermented sauerkraut and/or kimchi, daily for a month.
- probiotic mixtures, with multiple bacterial cultures, in pill or powder form, daily for a month.

3. consider a few simple yoga poses daily, to improve bowel mobility and tone: the plow and/or the wind-relieving pose, the triangle and/or the half-twist, and the downward facing dog and/or headstand.



- if you have limited mobility, these poses can also be done in a chair or in bed.
- their essence is slowly, gently twisting at the waist, bending, and raising the hips higher than the head if possible (wiping/scrubbing the floor on your hands and knees is another example).
- american fitness exercise as we know it involves forceful, repetitive motions. but in yoga, you carefully enter the pose, and then hold it, for 3-5 slow, relaxed breaths (or as strength permits). this causes the internal organs to shift and move around in a supported-relaxed way, rather than a bouncy-tense way.

fun facts to know and tell:

castor oil:

a chemical weapon named ricin can be made from the castor plant. ricin is water-soluble, and is made from the waste products left over from castor oil production. it is not found in castor oil itself. there is no antidote for ricin toxicity. see www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/ricin/facts.asp

sorbitol:

this low-calorie fruit sugar found in prune juice is also the sweetener in toothpaste, sugar-free candies and sugar-free gum. chewing more than 15-20 sticks of sugar-free gum every day has been known to cause chronic diarrhea; see www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/93769.php

metamucil:

this psyllium fiber product can be mixed with water and repeatedly microwaved to produce "flubber," a non-stick goo similar to Silly Putty. see chemistry.about.com/cs/howtos/ht/flubber.htm

magnesium sulfate:

also known as Epsom Salts, this stuff is also used to: stop seizures and premature labors in pregnant women, stop abnormal heart rhythms and severe asthma attacks, soak the soreness out of muscle and joint injuries, and make tofu. it can also be used to restore weak car batteries and perk up old lava lamps. see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnesium_sulfate