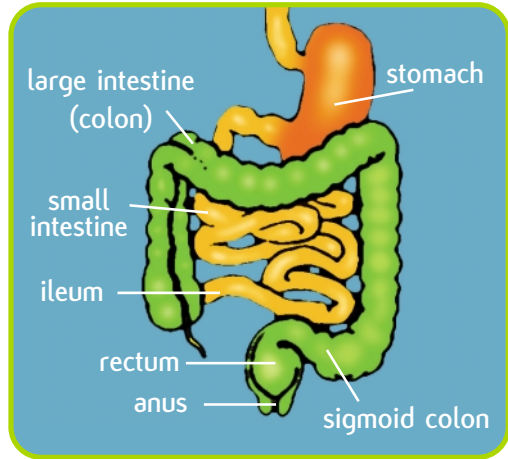




> constipation

CONSTIPATION

In order to explain constipation and its causes, an understanding of the components of the digestive system is necessary. Our digestive system is made up of our mouth, stomach, seven metres of small intestine, one and a half metres of large intestine and our bottom (rectum and anus).



Oesophagus (gullet)	Conveys food/drink from mouth to stomach
Stomach	Food is churned and mixed with gastric juices (acid and enzymes) to start digestion
Small intestine	Major site of digestion and absorption of nutrients
Ileum	The longest section of the small intestine where absorption of nutrients is completed
Large intestine (colon)	Water from food is absorbed back into the bloodstream making the waste more solid
Rectum	Waste (faeces) passes into the rectum and is eliminated from the body via the anus
Anus	Body opening at the end of the digestive tract

What is constipation?

The colon absorbs water while forming waste products as the food moves through it. This waste matter is the stool and muscle contractions in the colon push the stool towards the rectum. By the time the stool reaches the rectum, it is solid because most of the water has been absorbed. Constipation occurs when the colon absorbs too much water - making the stools solid and dry and hard to pass - or when the colon pushes stool along too slowly.

Defecation habits (passing a stool/motion) vary widely, with healthy people in the UK opening their bowels between three times a day and three times a week. Although there is no universally accepted definition of constipation, the condition is likely to be diagnosed if there is persistent difficult, infrequent, or seemingly incomplete defecation. Symptoms for diagnosing constipation include:

- defecation (passing a stool/motion) less than three times a week
- pain, discomfort or straining in more than 25% of defecations
- in more than 25% of defecations stools are hard and dry, may be large or small in size
- a sensation of incomplete evacuation (ie. a feeling that there is still stool in the rectum to pass out) in more than 25% of defecations
- a sensation of anorectal (between the anus and the rectum) obstruction/blockade in more than 25% of defecations
- manual help is needed to facilitate more than 25% of defecations (evacuation with the help of a finger, support of the pelvic floor)
- abdominal bloating, decreased appetite, lethargy, bad breath and/or a bad taste in the mouth.

With over three million people in the UK suffering from constipation once a week or more, constipation can affect anyone. However, despite this the digestive system was voted the least important behind that of the heart, lungs, kidney and circulatory system in a survey conducted by the Digestive Fitness Information Bureau (DFIB).

Did you know...?

Fact 1: Constipation can impact on your sex life...

- 25% of people surveyed by the DFIB stated that being constipated and uncomfortable would put them off sex
- For 25 to 34 year olds, being constipated was rated as the factor most likely to put them off sex, above tiredness, stress, a hangover and a headache

Fact 2: Constipation can impact on your quality of life...

- 65% of those surveyed stated discomfort, fatigue and skin complaints as symptoms they associated with constipation
- One in four women stated irritability as a symptom of constipation.

Considering that the digestive system consists of every process from the swallowing of food, to getting rid of our waste products, it's hardly surprising that it can be easily affected by some sort of digestive disorders during our lives. Constipation is one of the most common disorders.

Causes:

Constipation is not a disease as such – although, occasionally, it may be a symptom of an underlying condition. Constipation does not mean that you are unhealthy or even that you have an unhealthy lifestyle. Some people just seem more susceptible than others to having constipation, although the following can make it more likely:

Not drinking enough fluid – The digestive system needs plenty of fluid to keep things moving. Drinking between 1.5-2 litres a day will keep waste matter moist and enable it to be moved easily through the bowel. See the diet factsheet for more details.

Lack of exercise – Our digestive track is lined with muscles that contract to help move food through. General exercise acts indirectly on the gut to stimulate peristalsis, the process by which food is moved through the digestive system by involuntary contraction of the muscles lining the gut. If you are not taking regular exercise and have a relatively sedentary job, then your bowel may become sluggish.

Changes in routine and diet – The digestive system is sensitive to even small changes in our daily routine. This is why many of us experience constipation if we lead a hectic lifestyle, or when our diet and routine changes on holiday.

Stress – Constipation can be a symptom of stress, but stress can also be caused by constipation.

Low fibre diet – The role of fibre in the diet is to bulk up the stool by retaining fluid. This makes the stool easier to move through the digestive tract. A lack of fibre in the diet can result in harder, more compact stools, which take longer to pass through the system. In addition, bulk provided by fibre helps stimulate peristalsis.

Not listening to our body – Ignoring the urge to empty our bowels can lead to a build up of stool in our excretory passage. Often busy careers, travel and hectic social lives mean that we never have a set pattern for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Many of us skip meals, have an irregular sleep pattern and also often ignore the urge to go to the loo until we get home.

Did you know...?

- 12% of women surveyed by the DFIB would ignore the urge to pass a motion anywhere but their own home fearing that other toilets were not up to their own hygiene standards
- One in 10 women and one in 20 men say they ignore the urge to pass a motion if not at home, due to embarrassment.

Despite a busy lifestyle, getting into a routine is essential if you are trying to improve your digestive system – to stay regular and help prevent constipation.

TIP: Pay particular attention to your digestive health when travelling as this disrupts your normal diet and daily routine. An unfamiliar toilet – such as in a holiday apartment - can also cause a child to withhold a stool.

Who is more likely to suffer from constipation?

Around half of us will have bowel problems at some time in our lives. However, we are more likely to get constipation if:

Pregnant – Hormonal and physical changes affect the function of the bowel

Menstruating or menopausal – Hormonal changes such as at certain times during the menstrual cycle or menopause can sometimes lead to constipation

Ageing – As we age some of our bodily systems tend to slow down including the digestive system. In addition, other factors associated with ageing - such as decreased exercise and medications – can affect constipation

Children – Lack of routine and lack of fluids are common causes of constipation in children. Fear of using an unfamiliar toilet (such as at school) can cause children to become self-conscious about their toilet habits and a cycle of stool-withholding can result

In need of medication – Some commonly used medicines e.g. the painkiller codeine and some antacids (e.g. aluminium hydroxide) are known to cause constipation

People with Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) – People with IBS often experience constipation, sometimes alternating with diarrhoea

For advice on what to do if you are suffering from constipation, refer to the following factsheet on 'self-care'. If you are suffering constipation on a regular basis, then it would be wise to visit your GP who can help you identify why the problem is reoccurring.



References

www.digestivedisorders.org.uk

Thompson et al. Functional bowel disorders and functional abdominal pain.

Gut 45, 1143-1147. 1999

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information visit our website at www.constipationadvice.co.uk



Alternatively for further information on Senokot you can call the Medical
Information Unit at Reckitt Benckiser on 0500 455 456

