



Bowel health & dietary advice

Looking after your bowels is key to maintaining good digestive health. The following information will help you make informed choices around diet, lifestyle, and toileting habits to support regular and comfortable bowel movements.

What is constipation?

Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. It means different things to different people – such as hard stools, difficulty passing them, or infrequent bowel movements. Often it is accompanied with straining on the toilet.

Normal bowel frequency varies – from three times a day to three times per week.

It is important to avoid constipation and straining on the toilet, and the following tips can help to keep your bowel healthy

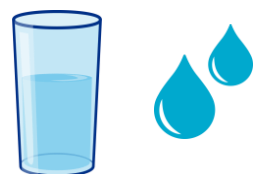


1. Stay Active

- Regular movement can help to stimulate your bowel.
- During the day, try to ensure you get up every hour even for a short walk around your house or garden, as being sedentary can increase the risk of constipation

2. Keep Hydrated

- Aim for 1.5–2 litres of fluid daily, more in hot weather or during exercise
- Water is best. Limit caffeine and alcohol, which can dehydrate you
- Dry, hard stools may signal you're not drinking enough



3. Don't Ignore the Urge

- Empty your bowels when you feel the need – respond to the 'call to stool'.
- Often this might be 15-20 minutes after eating – this is due to the 'gastro-colic reflex' – which is a natural response that happens when food enters your stomach. It sends signals to your large intestines to start moving, which can lead to the urge to have a bowel movement.
- Ignoring the urge can lead to constipation or can worsen symptoms.

4. Look at the amount of fibre in your diet

Aim for 30g of fibre per day (Department of Health recommendation).

- Fibre softens stools and helps regulate bowel movements.

Look at the Bristol stool chart – different types of fibre can impact your stool consistency.

Introduce fibres gradually into your diet, and ensure you have a good fluid intake.

Soluble fibre:

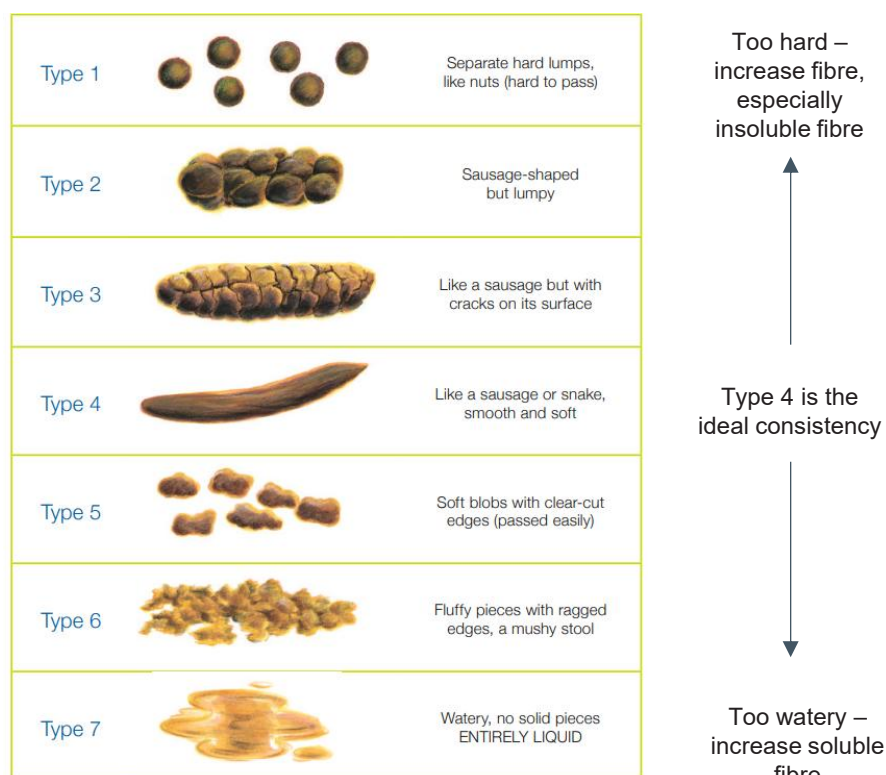
Rice, pasta, cereals, porridge, quinoa, couscous, sweet potato, carrots, bananas, avocado, chia seed.

Insoluble fibre (adds bulk, promotes movement):

Porridge oats, wholegrains, wholemeal bread, seeds, nuts, berries, grapes, kiwi, pear, tomatoes, lentils, broccoli, leafy greens, flaxseed/linseed.

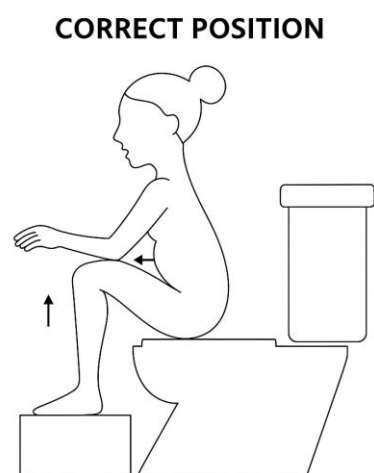
Psyllium husk is a good fibre supplement that can help to regulate your bowels and optimise stool consistency.

As a rough guide, when looking at food labels - choosing foods with a fibre content of over 15% means the product is high in fibre.



5. Use a good toilet position

- Sit with feet raised on a stool or rolled towel (knees above hips)
- Lean forward, elbows on knees, back straight, stomach relaxed
- This position helps the bowel empty more completely and comfortably as it straightens the natural curve in the lower bowel
- It is helpful to take a slow breath in through your nose so that your stomach moves outwards, and your chest remains still and then exhale through pursed lips



Other points

Laxatives

If after trying these strategies you are still struggling with constipation, you may benefit from some laxatives. Further information can be found:

nhs.uk/medicines/laxatives

Loose stools / reduced bowel control

Pelvic floor exercises can help you to improve your bowel control. When done correctly, these exercises can build up and strengthen the muscles to help you to hold both gas and stool in the back passage.

To find your pelvic floor muscles, try and squeeze the muscles around your anus as if you are stopping yourself from passing wind. You should feel a lift and squeeze.

Squeeze and release up to 10 times. Once you can do this, try holding the squeeze for up to 10 seconds. Aim to do 10 quick and 10 slow squeezes every day. You can do these laying down, sitting or in standing.

Adapting your food and fluid intake may be all you need to improve bowel control, but sometimes medication is needed for loose stools. You can also discuss medication options with your GP or pharmacist.

When to seek medical advice

Speak to your GP or healthcare provider if you notice:

- Blood in your stool or on toilet paper
- Unexplained weight loss
- Ongoing or new bloating (especially after meals)
- Persistent abdominal or rectal pain
- Significant changes in bowel habits lasting longer than 2 weeks (e.g. looser or harder stools, or change in frequency)



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**Please note this is a general advice leaflet.
Always speak with your GP or healthcare
professional for individual advice.**