



# Constipated Diarrhea. Can This Be IBS?

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## QUESTION

**Has anyone else experienced 'constipated diarrhea?'** I have been dealing with this issue for about 10 years. My daily symptoms include loose stools, straining, and the sensation that it is difficult to have a complete, satisfactory bowel movement. I do not have any hard, lumpy stools. I have several bowel movements every single day. Strangely enough, more times than not I experience what I refer to as 'constipated diarrhea.' The doctors wanted to know if I was either constipated or if I experienced diarrhea, but I feel like I have both. My IBS (as I am sure is most of yours) cannot be so easily classified as one or the other.

## ANSWER

Pain and/or discomfort related to a change in bowel habits are the main symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). These changes sometimes are described by the terms “diarrhea” and “constipation”. The commonly used terms diarrhea and constipation mean different things to different people. This applies to healthcare providers as well. However, bowel symptoms affect treatment choices. It is important that you and your healthcare provider communicate clearly about your symptoms and how they affect your life.

This Fact Sheet will explain one reason you might have symptoms of both types of bowel symptoms: diarrhea and constipation.

## How do we ‘translate’ bowel symptoms in a meaningful way?

*Constipation* is a cluster of symptoms which can mean having infrequent stools of any kind. Constipation is commonly described by the passing of hard pellet-like stools.

This can also include bowel movements (BMs) that happen less often, or three or fewer times in a week. People often have difficulty or straining when passing a BM, feel unable to completely empty during a BM, or the feel that they need to go but are not able to have a BM. Some people may need to manually remove stool. This involves sticking your fingers into your rectum to “pull” the stool out.

The **rectum** is the final section of the large intestine where BMs are stored before being emptied.

*Diarrhea* is defined as loose, watery, or frequent bowel movements. Everyone has had experience with diarrhea, the passage of liquid stools. For most people, it is a symptom that lasts for a couple days, then resolves suddenly, typically within one week. These acute episodes usually are due to infections resulting from consuming contaminated food or drink. The average American has an episode of acute diarrhea every few years. For other people, diarrhea may be a more chronic problem, occurring for months to years. About 5% of the population has diarrhea lasting more than a month in any year.

So, while it may seem strange to have “constipated diarrhea”, it is not that uncommon. If you have loose

stools, but also have difficulty having a BM or feel you have trouble completely emptying, then it makes sense. It is important to note that some people will experience “constipated diarrhea” due solely to constipation. “Loose stool overflow” occurs when hard stool becomes impacted (stuck) in the rectum and is not easily passed. The stool in the higher portions of the colon remains soft and leaks around the hard stool. The person experiences what they recognize as diarrhea since the stools are loose. However, sensations of straining and recurrent urges to have BMs or pass stool may indicate that the primary cause of the diarrhea may be constipation.

It is also important to remember that your bowel patterns may change over time. One person’s IBS might be different from another individual’s IBS. It is always important to maintain a working relationship with medical and support teams to obtain help when symptoms change.

Learn more about **diarrhea** with IFFGD Fact Sheets  
No. 150: *Chronic Diarrhea: Could it have an Everyday Cause?*  
and  
No. 258: *Patient Guide to Chronic Diarrhea*

Learn more about **constipation** with IFFGD Fact Sheet  
No. 281: *Chronic Constipation: A Comprehensive Overview*

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