



Common Questions About Chronic Constipation

What is chronic constipation?

Chronic means the constipation is long-lasting or keeps coming back. Most chronic constipation seen by doctors is *functional*. That means the problem is caused by the way the body is working.

How do I know what is wrong?

A doctor will make the diagnosis. Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms, take a history, do a physical exam, and do some tests. Be sure to tell your doctor about any medications you are taking.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms of chronic constipation can vary from person to person. Symptoms may include:

- Infrequent bowel movements
- Straining with bowel movements
- Hard or lumpy stools
- Frequent bowel movements of small amounts of stool
- Feeling of having incomplete bowel movements
- Needing to apply pressure by hand to move stool

There may also be bloating, distension, abdominal discomfort or gas pain, and a general feeling of ill-health.

What causes chronic constipation?

Many things can cause chronic constipation. Examples include certain diseases, birth defects, and medication side-effects.

In chronic functional constipation there are problems with the way the colon, as well as nerves and muscles related to bowel movement, functions or works. No damage is seen in the colon. Functional constipation is sometimes called *idiopathic* constipation.

What are the functional problems?

In most people the movement (motility) of stool through the colon is normal, but they have other difficulties in stool passage. For example, their stools may be too hard.

Some people have difficulty coordinating various muscles (pelvic floor dysfunction) which play a role in having a bowel movement. The passage of stool is then difficult. And, in some people stool moves too slowly through the colon. They may have less frequent bowel movements with straining and hard stools.

How is chronic constipation treated?

Treatments are aimed at managing symptoms over a long term and will depend on the underlying problem. Treatment of chronic functional constipation may involve one or a combination of measures.

For constipation that is mild or happens now and then increasing fiber intake may help.

It's important to have a bowel movement when you feel the urge. The feeling will pass if delayed too long.

Additionally, laxatives may be helpful. There are many types of laxatives. Your doctor will help you decide what one might be best for you.

Several newer prescription drugs are now available for the treatment of chronic idiopathic constipation. They may help produce softer, more frequent bowel movements, reduce bloating, and improve bowel function.

Biofeedback is a painless therapy. It uses sensors to help a person regain coordination of muscles that play a role in having a bowel movement. This treatment helps people with pelvic floor dysfunction.

Ask questions of your doctor or therapist. Be sure you understand any treatment and options, know the risks as well as benefits, and know what to do if side effects occur or symptoms return.

Where can I learn more?

Learn more on our website at: aboutConstipation.org.

About IFFGD

The International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education and research organization. We work to promote awareness, scientific advancement, and improved care for people affected by chronic digestive conditions. Our mission is to inform, assist, and support people affected by gastrointestinal disorders. Founded in 1991, we rely on donors to carry out our mission. Visit our websites at: www.iffgd.org.

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