

## What Can I Do Now?

For some people, simple changes can help them with constipation. A diet with enough fiber (20 to 35 grams each day) helps the body form soft, bulky stool. High-fiber foods include beans, whole grains and bran cereals, fresh fruits, and vegetables such as asparagus, brussels sprout, cabbage, and carrots. For people prone to constipation, limiting foods that have little or no fiber, such as ice cream, cheese, meat, and processed foods, is also important.

Other changes that may help treat and prevent constipation include drinking enough water and other liquids, such as fruit and vegetable juices and clear soups, so as not to become dehydrated, engaging in daily exercise, and reserving enough time to have a bowel movement. In addition, the urge to have a bowel movement should not be ignored.

## Physical Therapy Treatment May Include:

- **Education** on proper diet and nutrition. Eat the proper foods in the proper amount help ease constipation
- **Instruction** on lifestyle modifications
- **Techniques** to help you find the right muscles and learn how to use them correctly.
- **Exercises** to promote proper pelvic floor muscle performance.
- **Biofeedback** to show how your muscles are working and to retrain the muscles that control bowel movements. Biofeedback involves using a sensor to monitor muscle activity, which is displayed on a computer screen, allowing for an accurate assessment of body functions. Your Physical Therapist uses this information to help you learn how to retrain these muscles.
- **Electrical stimulation** to improve muscle awareness and use.
- **Training** on how to develop a regular pattern of bowel movements.



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# TAKE CONTROL OF CONSTIPATION WITH PHYSICAL THERAPY



## What Causes Constipation?

To understand constipation, it is important to know how the colon, or large intestine, works. As food moves through the colon, the colon absorbs water from the food while it forms waste products, or stool. Muscle contractions in the colon then push the stool toward the rectum. By the time stool reaches the rectum it is solid, because most of the water has been absorbed.

Constipation occurs when the colon absorbs too much water or if the colon's muscle contractions are slow or sluggish, causing the stool to move through the colon too slowly. As a result, stools can become hard and dry.

**The clinical definition of constipation** is having any two of the following symptoms for at least 12 weeks—not always consecutive—in the previous 12 months:

- Straining during bowel movements
- Lumpy or hard stool
- Sensation of incomplete evacuation
- Sensation of anorectal blockage/obstruction
- Fewer than three bowel movements per week.

**Common causes of constipation are:**

- Not enough fiber in the diet
- Lack of physical activity (especially in the elderly)
- Medications
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Changes in life or routine such as pregnancy, aging, and travel
- Abuse of laxatives
- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Dehydration
- Specific diseases or conditions, such as stroke (most common)
- Problems with the colon and rectum
- Problems with intestinal function (chronic idiopathic constipation)

## Constipation

Constipation is defined as having a bowel movement fewer than three times per week. With constipation stools are usually hard, dry, small in size, and difficult to eliminate. Some people who are constipated find it painful to have a bowel movement and often experience straining, bloating, and the sensation of a full bowel.

Some people think they are constipated if they do not have a bowel movement every day. However, normal stool elimination may be three times a day or three times a week, depending on the person.

Constipation is one of the most common gastrointestinal complaints in the United States. More than 4 million Americans have frequent constipation, accounting for 2.5 million physician visits a year. Constipation is a symptom, not a disease. Almost everyone experiences constipation at some point in their life, and a poor diet typically is the cause. Most constipation is temporary and not serious. Understanding its causes, prevention, and treatment will help most people find relief.

Even though constipation is common, it is **NOT** normal.



## Why a Physical Therapist?

Physical Therapists are healthcare experts in evaluating and treating the muscles, joints and movement of the human body. Constipation is one of many things that can happen as a result of weak muscles or dysfunction.

Constipation, if left untreated, can lead to many other medical complications such as hemorrhoids, anal fissures, fecal impaction, bowel obstruction, rectocele/rectal prolapse and back pain.

## How Can a Physical Therapist Treat Constipation?

Although treatment depends on the cause, severity, and duration of the constipation, in most cases dietary and lifestyle changes combined with physical therapy will help relieve symptoms and help prevent them from recurring. Because many symptoms of constipation are caused by lifestyle choices and pelvic floor muscle dysfunction, a specialty trained pelvic floor Physical Therapist is the ideal provider to help you gain control of your symptoms.

With appropriate Physical Therapy treatment you can return to a normal healthy and active lifestyle.