



Constipation and the Pelvic Floor Muscles

Many people of all ages experience some form of constipation during their lifetime. It is a common but treatable bowel problem. People who suffer from chronic constipation know the troublesome ways it can affect their lifestyle.

Common symptoms of constipation include: infrequent bowel movements, decreased amount of stool, straining to have a bowel movement, and/or a feeling of incomplete emptying. You may even feel the need to use enemas, suppositories, or laxatives in order to maintain regular bowel movements.

Avoid regular use of enemas, suppositories, and laxatives, unless instructed by your medical provider. They decrease the ability of the bowel to function, and may be habit forming and harmful with overuse or abuse.

How does constipation affect pelvic floor muscles?

Pelvic floor muscle strength is important for both bowel and bladder control. Chronic straining from constipation can lead to weakening of the pelvic floor muscles, excessive stress on pelvic organs and nerves, as well as bladder dysfunction and recurring accidental bowel leakage.

How does constipation affect the bladder?

The rectum is very close to the bladder. When the rectum is overfull (due to constipation), it can press on the bladder, reducing the amount of urine the bladder can hold. This may cause you to actually “leak” urine or make you feel as if you need to pass urine right away or frequently.

How does constipation affect fecal incontinence?

Weakened pelvic floor muscles, caused by constant straining during bowel movements, may contribute to recurring accidental bowel leakage called *fecal incontinence*. Fecal incontinence happens when some of the stool seeps around the constipated stool and leaks out. This is often referred to as *seepage*.

You can improve your muscle strength in the anus area with specific exercises as recommended by your physical therapist. In some cases, bowel training is needed. This might include learning to go to the bathroom at a specific time of day.

Types of constipation

There are two different types of constipation, *general constipation* and *outlet constipation*. Both can negatively impact your pelvic floor.

General constipation occurs when the muscles of the large intestine (the colon) have problems with peristalsis, which are waves of muscle contractions that move waste out of the body in the form of stool. This causes the waste to move very slowly or not much at all.

Several factors can lead to general constipation, some possibly occurring at the same time, including:

- Limited fluid and fiber intake
- Imbalances in the diet (too much sugar and animal fat)
- Too much sitting and little physical exercise or prolonged sitting
- Lifestyle changes, such as pregnancy and travel
- Medications taken for other conditions, such as opiates or other pain medications
- A sluggish colon (that may be related to irritable bowel syndrome)
- Improper use of laxatives

Please note if you smoke or chew tobacco: Nicotine can contribute to constipation and other health issues. You should consider eliminating it from your lifestyle.

Outlet constipation occurs when the stool is stuck in the rectum, which is usually due to dysfunction of the pelvic floor muscles. If the pelvic floor muscles in the rectum are too tight and unable to relax, it becomes difficult for stool to be passed. This can lead to straining during a bowel movement which causes the muscles to tighten even further.

When the muscles in the rectum are too tight and unable to relax properly, it is difficult for the stool to easily pass through. The pelvic floor muscles need to relax in order for the stool to move through the exit.

If the stool feels stuck there is a tendency to strain. But the more straining and pushing, the tighter the muscles become.

Treating constipation

INCREASE YOUR FIBER

Typical dietary recommendations are to increase your fiber intake to 25-35 grams per day. Fiber helps general bowel health by bulking and softening stool which makes it easier to pass.

Ways to maximize your fiber intake:

- Choose fresh fruits and raw vegetables rather than juice.
- Eat the skin of cleaned fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Choose bran and whole grain breads/cereals.
- Eat less processed foods and more fresh foods.
- Read Nutrition Fact labels on the packaged foods you buy. Products vary in fiber content.

Discuss your fiber needs with your medical provider; increasing fiber is not the solution for everyone.

Foods with high fiber content include:

- Vegetables
- Wheat bran
- Seeds (such as chia or flax)
- Fruits such as apples, oranges, pears, peaches
- Dried beans
- Popcorn
- Brown rice
- Whole grains
- Oat bran
- Prunes
- Oatmeal, barley and rye

Gradually add these foods to your diet in order to prevent gas and bloating. If you experience these symptoms, they should disappear within a few weeks as your body gets used to digesting fiber in larger amounts. *If the gas and bloating does not go away, please contact your medical provider.*

It's also important to keep hydrated and drink at least 6-8 cups of water daily. This helps keep the fiber moving through your system.

If your medical provider suggests you take fiber supplements, remember they can take several weeks, possibly months, to reach full effectiveness.

ALLOW YOURSELF TIME IN THE MORNING

Our bowels are usually inactive while we sleep, which is why it is important to take your time in the morning to wake up your bowels and allow time for the body's natural emptying reflex. This reflex occurs approximately 30 minutes after eating a meal or drinking a hot beverage and is the body's automatic mechanism to move stool. This usually happens in the mornings.

Try to get up earlier to eat breakfast, drink a hot beverage, and allow plenty of time to take advantage of this reflex. Engaging in mild-moderate physical activity, such as walking, may also help. For further information on exercise and constipation, please see ROUTINE EXERCISE (below).

PROPERLY POSITION YOURSELF ON THE TOILET

To allow for your pelvic floor muscles to relax as much as possible, it is helpful to properly position yourself (sit) on the toilet. Be sure your knees are positioned higher than your hips, use a foot stool if necessary. Leaning forward and supporting your elbows on your knees is also helpful. Pay attention to the relaxation of your pelvic floor muscles while emptying your bowels.

- Position your knees higher than your hips.
- Lean forward and put your elbows on your knees.
- Bulge out your abdomen, as you exhale.
- Relax your anus as you use your abdominal muscles as a pump to gently push the stool out of the open sphincter (the muscle ring that surrounds the anal canal).



ROUTINE EXERCISE

Exercising on a regular basis helps reduce constipation by stimulating a sluggish bowel and moving food through your intestines a little faster. The longer the food stays in your bowel, the more water is lost from the stool. This makes them hard and dry, which is more difficult to pass. Also, when your breathing and heart rate rise from aerobic exercise, it stimulates the natural contraction of intestinal muscles which moves stools out even quicker.

Please call us at **617-754-9100**, if you have any questions.