

Constipation is a challenge facing many people. Having constipation while living with Parkinson's disease can have a negative impact on your enjoyment of life. Arming yourself with information to prevent or manage constipation is an important part of living well and promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Not drinking enough fluids and difficulty chewing or swallowing can contribute to constipation as well. Trouble with chewing and swallowing can make it hard to get enough fibre in your diet.

WHAT IS CONSTIPATION?

It is a myth that you must pass stool at least once a day. Many things influence the frequency of bowel movements: age, diet, medications, stress, inactivity, and having Parkinson's disease and other medical conditions. A normal range is 3 times a day to 3 times a week. The stool should be soft, easy to pass and, at the end of it, you should feel that your bowel is "empty". Infrequent bowel movements (fewer than every 3 or 4 days), a stool that is hard and dry, or straining to expel it, may mean constipation. It is time to act!

Being constipated can be more than just a nuisance. It may interfere with how well your medications are absorbed, making them less effective. You can feel unwell, uncomfortable, irritable, nauseated or lethargic. In severe cases, it can lead to a blockage of the intestine (impaction), making it impossible to pass any stool. In very rare circumstances, impaction

requires urgent medical attention. Constipation may also disturb your bladder function and may make you feel that you need to urinate more frequently and urgently.

PARKINSON'S DISEASE AND CONSTIPATION

Not everyone who has Parkinson's disease has constipation. However, for most of them, dealing with constipation can be a real burden. Parkinson's disease affects the bowels in a number of ways.

Just as the muscles in your arms, legs, trunk and face may be slower and stiff, the muscles of your intestines may also have reduced mobility. With slowed mobility, the stool does not move very quickly through the bowel, which may cause constipation. The muscles involved in emptying the bowels may also be affected by Parkinson's disease and may not be as coordinated as before. They may not be able to relax, making it more difficult to eliminate the stool completely.

Certain drugs used to treat Parkinson's disease may cause constipation or affect your appetite. If you start a new medication and you notice a change in how frequently you have a bowel movement, contact your healthcare team. They will review all your medications and make recommendations.



Parkinson's disease is part of your life and constipation can complicate things further. If in spite of your best efforts, you are still constipated, ask to be referred to a dietician. Meal plans and strategies that he gives you you could be most useful.

GOOD BOWEL ROUTINE

People often ignore the urge to empty their bowels. This should be avoided! Most people have the urge to void first thing in the morning. Establish a routine that will encourage a bowel movement:

- Have a warm drink first.
- Take your time. If you are not relaxed, it will be hard for your bowels to open!
- Position yourself in a way to encourage expulsion of stool.
 - ✓ Sit on the toilet with your elbows on your knees and lean forward.
 - ✓ Placing your feet up on a little step-stool may also help.

Soft stool is easy to pass and avoids excessive straining. Stool softeners such as Colace® (docusate) do exactly that! They can be used daily if needed.

As for laxatives, suppositories, enemas, consult your healthcare team for direction how to use them. It may be tempting to use them. Be careful! They may be habit forming. Long-term use may result in your bowels becoming dependent on them. You could even cause damage to the lining of the intestines.

DIET

Eat fibre-rich foods! Increasing fibre-rich foods is the best way to get more fibre.

Among foods to be given preference: legumes (beans, peas, lentils), fruits (prunes, dried fruits, bananas, apples, berries), whole grains, bran and nuts.

As it may take 4 to 12 weeks until the positive effects of these foods are felt, be patient if you don't see changes immediately! The key is to be consistent in your diet and exercise in order to train your bowels to a new pattern.

You can also supplement your diet with products that increase stool volume, such as Metamucil®, Benefibre®, Prodiem® or fibre pills.



“Laxative jam” recipe:

1 cup chopped pitted prunes

1 cup chopped dates

1 cup water

1. Boil together until thick
2. Your jam is now ready to use and should be stored in the refrigerator!

IMPORTANT!

If you are increasing the fibre in your diet, be sure to introduce it gradually and make sure you are drinking enough fluids. Otherwise, you will get more constipated!

FLUID INTAKE

Drinking plenty of fluids (8 to 10 glasses) throughout the day is important. If you have increased your fibre intake, you must adjust your liquid consumption – any fluid will work: water, soup, tea, fruit juice. Remember that fizzy drinks may make you feel bloated and that, for some people, milk may increase constipation.

Avoid caffeine and alcohol which act as diuretics or “water pills”. This can make constipation worse.

Start the day with a warm drink. This will help get the bowels moving.

IMPORTANT!

Fruit juice is high in sugar. If you are concerned about your sugar intake, limit your fruit juice consumption to one glass per day.

EXERCISE

Exercise helps to stimulate the bowels. Aim for at 15 to 30 minutes of exercise a day.

