



Narodowe Centrum Edukacji Żywieniowej



CONSTIPATION

Constipation is a condition in which there is usually a reduced frequency of defecations (less than 3 times a week) and accompanying discomfort. Constipation can also be diagnosed when stools are hard and defecation is difficult, accompanied by a feeling of incomplete bowel movement. Predisposing factors for constipation include:

- gender (women are twice as likely to be affected),
- age (the frequency increases with age and reaches 50% in people over 80),
- low physical activity,
- sedentary lifestyle,
- unhealthy diet (Western-style, low-energy diet),
- use of certain medications (including opiates, antihypertensives, antidepressants, anticonvulsants, iron preparations),
- diseases (e.g., hypothyroidism, hyperparathyroidism, inflammatory bowel disease),
- pregnancy.

Diet

Lifestyle modification, including diet, is an important part of the treatment of chronic constipation. The basic treatment is to increase the intake of products that are sources of dietary fibre, such as vegetables, fruit, whole-grain cereal products, legumes, nuts and seeds. It is also very important to increase the amount of liquids, mainly water. It is worth mentioning that constipation may also result from insufficient food intake, e.g., as a result of a restrictive weight loss diet. The diet should be individually adjusted to the patient's needs. To support the patient in the process of changing their eating habits, a dietician can be consulted.



Key nutritional guidelines

1 Eat meals regularly, every 3-4 hours, with the last one at the latest 2-3 hours before bedtime.

2 Before breakfast you can drink a glass of water, which will stimulate intestinal peristalsis.

3 **Eat more fibre, which increases stool volume and speeds up intestinal transit. The recommended daily fibre intake according to the WHO should be 25 g**, while the ADA (American Dietetic Association) differentiates it by gender and age and recommends a daily fibre intake of 25 g per day for women, 38 g for men, and 19-25 g for children. Increasing fibre intake is also associated with additional health benefits. According to the EFSA expert panel, in some cases in adults, a fibre intake higher than 25 g per day can help maintain a healthy body weight and reduce the risk of developing diet-related diseases. **The increase in fibre intake should be carried out gradually**, as a sudden change may cause bloating and other gastrointestinal disorders.

4 Eat a minimum of 400g of fruit and vegetables a day. Eat vegetables as often as possible and add them to most meals throughout the day. Don't forget pickles (e.g. cabbage and cucumbers), which are beneficial for the intestinal microbiota. Eat fruit in smaller quantities as they contain more simple sugars. However, they are a valuable source of dietary fibre, polyphenols and sorbitol, i.e. ingredients that facilitate bowel movement. Choose raw fruit more often and dried fruit only occasionally. Add them to meals, e.g. oatmeal, smoothies, salads. It is not advisable to drink juices, beverages and nectars that are devoid of dietary fibre.

5 Choose whole-grain cereal products, i.e. wholemeal bread, graham, coarse groats, natural cereal flakes, wholemeal pasta, brown rice.

6 Add nuts and seeds (e.g. sunflower, pumpkin, flaxseed) to your meals, which are an excellent source of dietary fibre. The recommended daily serving is 30 g (a handful).

7 Increasing fibre intake is effective in treating constipation when accompanied by adequate fluid intake. **It is recommended to consume min. 2.5 litres of fluid a day**. Primarily water, but tea, coffee, and herbal infusions, soups, smoothies and fermented dairy products will also be sources of fluids. In addition, you can consider a regular consumption of high-mineralised water rich in magnesium, which improves the consistency of the stool and speeds up intestinal peristalsis.

8 Consume fermented dairy products on a daily basis, i.e. yoghurt, kefir, soured milk, which have a beneficial effect on the intestinal microbiota and, as a result, support intestinal peristalsis.



9

Limit your intake of products that are sources of simple sugars (e.g. sugar used to sweeten beverages, sweets, confectionery, jams, ice cream, honey) and fats (e.g. fatty sauces, fried foods, breaded meats, butter), which slow down the digestive tract, cause bloating and abdominal discomfort.

10

In special cases and after medical consultation, probiotic and/or prebiotic preparations (including fibre, e.g. from psyllium) may be considered.

Physical activity

1

Make sure you exercise regularly on a regular basis to support bowel peristalsis. Try to be active for a minimum of 30 minutes each day. Adjust the type of physical activity to your abilities. Remember that simple activities such as walking, climbing stairs, active housework or playing with children also have many health benefits.

Other elements of lifestyle

1

Avoid withholding stool pushing, as this is a factor leading to the development of habitual constipation. It is recommended to introduce regular attempts of calm bowel movement for a few minutes a day, preferably after breakfast. Also pay attention to your posture - sitting with your knees raised slightly above your hips and using a footrest is considered beneficial.

2

If you are exposed to stress, work out how to cope with it. Relaxation techniques based on mindfulness and meditation, breathing exercises or yoga can be useful.









References:

1. Włodarek D., Lange E. (eds.): Współczesna dietoterapia. Wydawnictwo Lekarskie PZWL, Warsaw, 2022.
2. Bharucha A.E., Lacy B.E.: Mechanisms, evaluation, and management of chronic constipation. Gastroenterology, 2020, 158(5): 1232-1249.



Recommended and not recommended products in constipation

Remember that the overall profile of your diet, the composition of individual meals and the quality of the products you choose is important. The table below contains examples of products that should be the basis of your diet and those that you should keep to a minimum. Treat it as a guide to changing your dietary habits to healthier ones.

Group of products	Recommended	Not recommended
Vegetables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all fresh and frozen pickles in limited quantities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> vegetables with fatty sauces, roux
Fruit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all fresh and frozen dried fruit in limited quantities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> candied fruit fruit syrups
Grain products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wholemeal flours whole wheat and graham bread natural cereal flakes: oat, barley, spelt, rye wheat bran, rye bran, oat bran groats: buckwheat, barley pearl, bulgur, quinoa rice: brown, wild, red whole wheat pasta: wheat, rye, buckwheat, spelt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> refined flour confectionery breads, light toasted bread, Kaiser rolls, bread, butter rolls breakfast cereals with added sugar: corn, chocolate, muesli, crunchy small groats: couscous, farina, cornmeal white rice light pasta: wheat, rice noodles
Potatoes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cooked baked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> potatoes with fatty additives like cream or butter fried French fries, chips deep-fried potato pancakes
Milk and dairy products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reduced-fat milk (up to 2% fat) natural (no sugar added) fermented dairy products with up to 3% fat: yoghurt, kephir, buttermilk, skyr, cottage cheese, soured milk skimmed and semi-skimmed cottage cheese mozzarella light cheese for sandwiches (in limited quantities) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> whole milk condensed milk sour cream, coffee cream sweetened fruit yogurts, dairy desserts cheeses: full-fat cheese, processed cheese, feta, blue cheese (brie, camembert, roquefort), full-fat mozzarella, mascarpone
Eggs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> soft-boiled and hard-boiled eggs, poached eggs, scrambled eggs, omelettes fried without fat or with a small amount of fat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eggs fried in large amounts of fat such as butter, bacon, lard, salo (slanina) eggs with mayonnaise
Meat and meat products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lean meats without skin: veal, chicken, turkey, rabbit in limited quantities, lean beef and pork: (e.g. loin, tenderloin) lean cold cuts, preferably home-made: tenderloin, cooked ham, poultry cold cuts, roast loin, roast turkey/chicken breast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fatty meats: pork, beef, mutton, goose, duck fatty cold cuts: (e.g. gammon, salami, brawn, bacon, spam) canned meats, offal cold cuts, pâtés, hot dogs, kabanos, sausages
Fish, fish products and seafoods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lean or fatty sea and freshwater fish, e.g. cod, sole, hake, blue grenadier, zander, bream, pike, perch, mackerel, salmon, halibut, carp in limited quantities, herring and other fish in vegetable oils, smoked fish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> canned fish, caviar



Recommended and not recommended products in gestational diabetes

Group of products	Recommended	Not recommended
Legumes and legume products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> legumes, e.g. soybean, chickpeas, peas, lentils, beans, broad beans legume spreads soy flour, soy drinks with no added sugar, soy preparations: tofu, tempeh legume pasta (e.g. beans, peas) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> low-quality ready-made legume products (e.g. soy sausages, breaded soy cutlets, soy pates, vege burgers)
Fats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> olive oil, canola oil, linseed oil butter and vegetable oils mix without palm oil soft margarines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> butter and clarified butter lard, сало (slanina), tallow hard margarines (blocks) tropical oils: palm, coconut mayonnaise
Nuts and seeds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> nuts, e.g. walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds seeds, e.g. pumpkin, sunflower, flax seeds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> nuts and seeds, salted, in chocolate, caramel, honey, sprinkles, breaded and in chips
Sugar, sweets and salty snacks 	<p>In limited quantities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> fruit purees, mousses, sorbets with no added sugar natural yoghurt with fruit, fruit yoghurt with no added sugar natural sweeteners (e.g. xylitol, stevia, erythritol) low-sugar jam jellies and kissels with no added sugar home-made pies and cakes with no added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sugar, e.g. white, cane, brown, coconut honey, maple syrup, date syrup, agave syrup sweets high in sugar and fat: (e.g. cakes, cookies, chocolate bars, milk and white chocolate, halva, doughnuts, angel wings, sweets) salty snacks: (e.g. chips, salty sticks, crispy flakes, crackers, nachos, crisps) chocolate and chocolate products
Beverages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> water drinks with no added sugar, e.g. coffee, cereal coffee, weak teas, herbal and fruit infusions, kompots vegetable and fruit juices in limited quantities homemade unsweetened lemonade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> alcohol drinks sweetened carbonated and non-carbonated drinks energy drinks nectars high-sugar fruit syrups drinking chocolate, cocoa strong teas
Spices and sauces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fresh and dried single-ingredient herbs (e.g. basil, oregano, herbs de Provence, turmeric, cinnamon, ginger) spice blends without added salt homemade salad dressings based on lemon juice, a small amount of oil or yoghurt and herbs potassium sodium salt in limited quantities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> salt, e.g. table salt, Himalayan salt, sea salt spice mixtures containing a high proportion of salt bouillon cubes liquid flavour enhancers prepared sauces
Soups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> soups based on vegetable or lean meat broths soups whitened with milk up to 2% fat or yoghurt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> soups with fatty meat broth soups thickened with roux or whitened with sour cream instant soups
Prepared meals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mix of frozen vegetables or fruit mix of groats and legumes instant oatmeal with no added sugar cream soups ready-made vegetable stir-fry foods salt-free vegetable pastes and purees <p><i>Read labels, compare ingredients and pay attention to added sugar, salt and fat content.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fast food, e.g. toasted open-faced sandwiches, hot dogs, hamburgers, kebab frozen pizzas and toasted open-faced sandwiches ready-made foods in bread crumbs, in fatty sauces, in refined flours instant meals (e.g. sauces, soups)
Technological processing of food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cooking in water, steaming (products cereals and vegetables cooked al dente) grilling using an electric grill or grill pans baking in foil, parchment paper, roasting sleeve, ovenproof dish fat-free frying stewing without pre-frying <p><i>Occasionally, you can use a small amount of the recommended vegetable fat, such as olive oil or canola oil.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> deep frying stewing with pre-frying baking in large amounts of fat breadding



Example of a quality menu in constipation

BREAKFAST:

Oatmeal with apple and dried cranberries

- rolled oats
- 2% fat milk
- dried cranberries
- almond flakes
- walnuts
- apple

LUNCH:

Whole grain sandwiches with cottage cheese and vegetables

- wholemeal rye bread
- skimmed cottage cheese
- natural yoghurt
- radish
- chive
- cherry tomatoes

DINNER:

Buckwheat pudding with chicken and vegetables

- buckwheat groats
- chicken breast
- canola oil
- mushrooms
- red onion
- zucchini
- parsley
- spices: turmeric, pepper, hot pepper, sweet paprika



AFTERNOON SNACK:

Fruit cocktail

- fresh or frozen berries
- kefir
- flax seeds

SUPPER:

Toast with red bean paste and vegetables

- graham roll
- bean paste: cooked or canned red beans, olive oil, spices: garlic, herbes de Provence
- red bell pepper

