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CONSTIPATION

This general guide is designed to provide background and general advice about the causes and treatment of constipation. It aims to supplement verbal discussion, to answer common questions and to be readily available as an *aide memoir*. It cannot cover in detail every aspect of your individual circumstances and may not deal with some areas that are of particular concern to you. It is not a substitute for specific, individual advice from your doctor.

Further information is available at the web site above. This site also provides links to other sites that may provide additional information.

What is constipation?

Constipation is a constellation of symptoms. It may include one, or several, of the following:- infrequent defaecation, the passage of hard stools, difficulty in opening the bowels (straining) and painful defaecation. It may be associated with bloating and a feeling of fullness.

As the stool moves through the colon water is absorbed and the stool becomes harder. The muscles of the bowel have to contract hard to push a hard, as opposed to a soft, stool through the colon. There are many causes for this. Many are 'life style' issues (see below), but it is also important that correctable causes, like an under active thyroid, are identified.

The average frequency of defaecation in the general population varies from once every two or three days to twice per day. You are not required to empty your bowels on a daily basis. Not to defaecate each day is not 'failure', but the normal variation that everybody experiences.

Three simple goals.

Although there are many causes of constipation the common causes are lack of exercise, a poor diet and inadequate fluid intake.

Regular exercise.

Exercise promotes bowel activity. This does not have to be 'heavy' exercise. Walking, swimming, dancing and cycling are just some of the exercises that are suitable. Aim for at least 30 minutes a day. Some people may develop constipation if they cannot exercise, such as a stroke, old age or a temporary change in life style.

A healthy diet

Many modern foods lack the fibre found in more traditional diets. This results in a hard,

small stool that is difficult to propel through the large bowel. Such stools are a contributing factor to many cause of constipation. A separate high fibre advice sheet is available. You need about 25-30 grams of fibre per day

Generous fluid intake

Fibre binds water into the stool, making it softer and bulkier. It is then easier to pass. You must ensure that you drink plenty of water. Drink at least 1.5 to 2 litres each day, more in summer. Note that fruit juices and many fizzy drinks (e.g. colas) are high in calories. Fluids that are high in caffeine may dehydrate and make constipation worse. Alcohol will do the same.

Toilet habit.

Prolonged visits to the bathroom with straining are very detrimental to many cause of constipation.

Medication.

Some common medications will cause constipation. These include pain medication (especially those with codeine), some antacids, anti-depressants and iron.

Initially an artificial bulking agent may be prescribed to supplement your diet whilst you increase your fibre intake. Normally a husk based agent such as Metamucil will be recommended. As they work by absorbing water a high intake is required. As an alternative osmotic laxatives can be used. Lactulose is a gentle example, Epsom salts a more powerful alternative. Many patients will be able to stop laxatives once they have adjusted to the simple life style goals.

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