

Constipation

The Health Column

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One of the busiest sections of any pharmacy is where medicines for upset stomachs and bowel problems are kept – the so-called ‘tums and bums’ area.

One of the most common bowel problems is constipation. This condition can be distressing and debilitating.

Constipation is the term used to describe bowel motions which are less frequent and hard to pass. Sufferers may only be able to pass small amounts at a time, or have difficulty passing stools. Other signs and symptoms of constipation are pain, cramps or swelling in the abdominal area, or leaving the toilet feeling your bowel is not completely empty.

Constipation usually occurs because the colon (part of the digestive system) absorbs too much water from food. This can happen if food moves through the digestive system too slowly. The bowel motions then become too dry and hard.

According to the Continence Foundation of Australia (www.continence.org.au) there are many factors that can cause or worsen constipation, including:

- not enough fibre in the diet. Fibre is found in fruit and vegetables, wholemeal bread, seeds, nuts and grains, and high-fibre cereals.
- not drinking enough water – always drink more water when you increase fibre in your diet
- lack of physical exercise
- stress, anxiety, depression and grief
- delaying the urge to go to the toilet
- using laxatives for a long time
- side effects of some medicines (even common ones like pain killers or iron tablets)
- pregnancy



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- being overweight
- not being able to go to the toilet because of poor mobility
- some nerve diseases
- some bowel problems like haemorrhoids, irritable bowel syndrome, or diverticulitis
- anorectal pain caused by haemorrhoids, fissures (tear in the skin of the anus) or birth trauma
- a slow transit bowel. This means it takes longer for the faeces to move through the digestive system to the rectum, so more water is removed over time and constipation is much more likely. This occurs where there is nerve damage such as with stroke, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis or trauma.

Severe constipation is the most common cause of faecal incontinence (or bowel leakage), especially in older people. This is because hard bowel motions are difficult to pass and may cause a partial blockage higher up in the bowel, resulting in watery bowel motions flowing around the constipated stool without warning. This is sometimes mistaken for diarrhoea.

Constipation can affect bladder control and urinary continence. If you sometimes leak urine or feel that you need to frequently visit the toilet to pass urine, it could be that constipation is involved. An over-full bowel (due to constipation) can press on the bladder, reducing the amount of urine it can hold or making you feel the need to pass urine urgently.

Constipation can also affect pelvic floor muscles. Pelvic floor muscle strength is important for both bladder and bowel control. These muscles stretch like a trampoline from the pubic bone at the front to the coccyx (tail-bone) at the back. They can be weakened by straining due to constipation, pregnancy and childbirth, or perhaps heavy lifting. Strong pelvic floor muscles are necessary for bladder and bowel control – to be able to 'hold on'.

If you think you have constipation, talk to your pharmacist or doctor who can recommend some ways to manage this minor ailment. One way to treat constipation is by taking a laxative. There are various types of laxatives, which work in different ways, so it's important to talk to a health professional before taking laxatives. Types of laxatives include bulking agents, lubricants, and stimulating/irritant laxatives.

Your pharmacist can also advise on how to improve your diet, strengthen your pelvic floor muscles, and also address any other factors that can cause or worsen constipation.

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination and your pharmacist can give you more information about issues affecting your bowel. Your Self Care pharmacy has a range of Fact Cards including *Fibre and Bowel Health*, *Constipation and Haemorrhoids*, and *Pelvic Floor Exercises*. For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au: 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.