



# Internally Yours<sup>®</sup>

A Publication  
of Atlanta South  
Gastroenterology, P.C.

[www.AtlantaSouthGastro.com](http://www.AtlantaSouthGastro.com)

[www.EndoAtlas.com](http://www.EndoAtlas.com)

## Constipation

Constipation has no precise definition. It is generally accepted that bowel movements should occur three or more times per week. They should be painless, should not require excessive straining, and should provide the feeling of satisfactory emptying. It is not, however, necessary to have a bowel movement every day.

Constipation is therefore the passage of hard stools less than three times per week. Accompanying symptoms may be abdominal bloating, excessive gas, cramping, rectal discomfort and the sensation of incomplete emptying.

Constipation is a symptom and not a disease, and everyone experiences brief episodes of constipation from time to time. There are many potential causes, but anything which slows the passage of stool through the colon or reduces the water content of the stool, will lead to constipation.

There are many medications which may cause constipation, including aluminum-containing antacids, many pain

medications, and certain drugs to treat high blood pressure, Parkinson's disease, depression, and certain heart conditions.

When the diet is low in fiber, stools will contain less water and be less bulky, and therefore travel through the colon slowly.

Poor habits, such as resisting the



urge to have a bowel movement, can also lead to constipation.

The excessive use of laxatives, often by individuals who are overly concerned about having a daily bowel movement, may have harmful effects. Laxatives may cause significant losses of water and minerals, such as potassium and sodium. Laxatives may flush out the intestinal contents before nutrients and vitamins can be absorbed. Finally, the overly frequent use of laxatives or enemas may paradoxically cause constipation, by weakening the muscles of the colon. As

a result of this damage, the colon will no longer function on its own.

Steps may be taken to help with bothersome constipation. The recommendations below present alternatives to the daily use of laxatives:

- Drink 8-12 glasses of water and other clear fluids daily
- Add fiber to the diet: fruits, whole grain (bran), vegetables
- Exercise daily
- Take a bulk-forming fiber supplement such as Benefiber, Metamucil or Citrucel
- Add a stool softener such as Colace
- Avoid resisting the urge to have a bowel movement
- Try to establish a daily routine, having a bowel movement the same time each day
- For hard stools, try glycerine suppositories rather than laxatives
- The occasional nighttime use of a gentle laxative such as mineral oil or milk of magnesia is not harmful, but avoid harsh cleansing agents such as soapsuds enemas

