

UnityPoint Health - Allen Hospital

Digestive Health Center

Constipation

Constipation is a very common condition affecting adults as well as children. Constipation is the infrequent passage of stools, which are often drier or harder than normal. Bowel movements can be difficult and painful. Common symptoms of constipation include bloating, sluggishness, feeling of fullness in the rectum, and a general sense of “feeling out of sorts”.

Causes

Constipation may be caused by a disruption in the natural contractions or rhythms of the colon due to stress, medication, pregnancy, illness, resisting the urge to defecate, pain from hemorrhoids, lack of exercise, a low-fiber diet, or not drinking enough fluids. Constipation may also be caused by a chronic medical problem, such as diabetes or heart disease. Constipation can also be caused by overuse of stimulant laxatives or enemas.

The Digestive Process

Your digestive system is one continuous tube that breaks down food products, absorbs nutrients, and eliminates unusable waste in a step-by-step process. The digestive system begins at the mouth and ends at the rectum.

The Upper Digestive System

In the upper digestive system, chewing softens and breaks up the food into small particles so it can pass down through the esophagus to the stomach. In the stomach, the food is further broken down before moving to the lower digestive system where food is converted into energy sources.

The Lower Digestive System

In the small intestine, food is broken down into nutrients and absorbed through the intestinal wall into the bloodstream. By the time food passes through the more than 20 feet of the small intestine and reaches the large bowel (colon), most of the nutrients have been absorbed and waste products (stool) are left. It is the job of the colon to absorb excess water from the waste and move it to the rectum so it can be expelled. Changes in the colon’s natural contractions or rhythms cause waste material to either move too slowly and become hard and dry (constipation), or move too rapidly and become soft and watery (diarrhea).

Treatment

- Eat regular meals. Chew food thoroughly and slowly.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Include water, milk, fruit and vegetable juices, and soup.
- Add fiber to your diet. Fiber adds bulk to help the colon function normally again. A high fiber diet adds bulk to help keep other food substances moving through the digestive tract. Fiber also holds water, adding bulk and softening the stool. Replace foods high in fat and calories with high-fiber foods.
- Respond to the urge to move your bowels. If you delay you may have to strain later.
- Exercise daily. Start walking, bicycling, or swimming.
- Avoid straining. It may cause irritation and hemorrhoids. If you must strain to have a bowel movement, you are not eating enough fiber or drinking enough fluids.

