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NHS Foundation Trust

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# Constipation and defecatory dysfunction

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**GI Unit**

**Patient Information**



**NHS**



## Constipation and bowel emptying dysfunction

**Constipation** is when the bowel does not move easily or regularly. The bowel may move fewer than three times a week and the bowel motion (stool) may be hard and difficult to pass. Some people who are constipated find it painful to have a bowel movement and often experience straining, bloating and the sensation of a full bowel.

To move stool through the colon (the large bowel) we need a healthy balanced diet rich in fibre and fluids, as well as exercise. Slower passage of stool through the colon can cause the bowel motion to become dry and hard, and more difficult to pass.

**Obstructive defaecation** is the reduced ability to evacuate contents from the rectum (lower bowel) even with excessive straining, despite there being no actual blockage (obstruction). There is often the sensation of anal blockage during defaecation and the feeling that the bowel has not emptied properly. Some people describe having to use their fingers to assist emptying the bowel. This type of problem can be caused by poor muscle coordination when sitting on the toilet (sphincter muscles can tense/close instead of relax/open) or by the presence of a prolapse when the bowel motion can become trapped in a pouch/bulge in the lower rectal wall, making it difficult to empty.

## Management options

There are many ways to manage constipation.

Lifestyle changes:

- **A high fibre diet** – you may be referred to a dietitian for more advice
- **Keeping hydrated** – it is important to drink lots of water. You should be aiming to drink up to 2 litres of fluids daily
- **Regular exercise** – this includes walking or daily aerobic exercises
- **Avoiding delays** – once you have felt the urge to pass stool, do not put off going to the toilet.

## Daily defaecation routine

It is important to start the day with a good breakfast containing fibre. Try and go to the toilet 30–40 minutes after eating – this sets off a ‘gastro-colic response’ and gives the sense of an ‘urge’ to pass stool.

The most effective way to open your bowels is by using the method below.



Picture used courtesy of Macmillan Cancer Support

When sitting on the toilet, have your feet up on a small stool so that your knees are higher than your hips. Your feet and knees should be wide apart.

- Lean forwards and rest your elbows/forearms on your knees
- Relax your shoulders
- Breathe in, widen the abdominals, so that your tummy goes out
- As you breathe out, try making a “jhjh, moo, or ijhhh” sound to allow you to relax the sphincter muscles and help stool pass more easily.

You may need to practice this breathing technique a few times to help stool pass. The key thing is not to strain the sphincter muscles whilst passing stool.

This technique also works well when you are constipated. Do not spend endless time in the toilet. Do not strain – try again either later in the day or the next day. Excessive straining uses the wrong muscles and does not help the evacuating process.

### **Biofeedback**

Biofeedback is the process of relearning bodily functions that were previously performed at a subconscious level. This can be discussed with your physiotherapist, if appropriate for you.

### **Medication**

There are many types of medication (laxatives) you can take if needed. This is something that can be discussed with your doctor.

### **Rectal irrigation**

This is a device that helps to put water into the bowel and wash out the stool. Again, this is completed with the daily defaecation routine and exercises. The aim is to do this regularly to help ensure the rectum is empty after defecation. Over time, this will help to prevent constipation and maintain a normal stool type. Our pelvic floor physiotherapist assesses patients for the most suitable irrigation system and teaches them how to use them. Should this be appropriate for you, a prescription will be sent to your GP, so this can be provided locally.

## Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns about the information in this booklet, please contact:

Pelvic health physiotherapist .....

GIANTs (GI and Nutrition Team service) .....  
020 7811 8216 or 8106

Your Clinical Nurse Specialist .....

Alternatively, please call:

**The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899**

You can ring the hotline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Call us straight away if you are feeling unwell or are worried about the side effects of cancer treatments.

This service provides specialist advice and support to all Royal Marsden patients, as well as to their carers, and both hospital and community-based doctors and nurses caring for Royal Marsden patients.

## References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre  
Freephone: 0800 783 7176  
Email: [patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk](mailto:patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk)

No conflicts of interest were declared in the production of this booklet.

Should you require information in an alternative format, please contact The Royal Marsden Help Centre.

The patient information service is generously supported by The Royal Marsden Charity.

[royalmarsden.org](http://royalmarsden.org)

Registered Charity No.1095197



Published November 2022. Planned review November 2025  
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Radiotherapy and  
Chemotherapy Services  
F538021 & F538022

