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Managing Constipation

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Rotation 2, June-July 2022

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Nuvance Health Medical Practices - Primary Care Newtown, CT



The University of Vermont
LARNER COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

Problem Identification

- The prevalence of chronic constipation in adults is 10-15%¹
- When asked to describe their constipation, patients often use words such as “frustrating” and “bothersome”²
- Constipation is associated with a lower quality of life and poorer psychological well-being³
- Initial management of constipation typically consists of lifestyle modifications and OTC laxatives
- 40% of patients report using some form of OTC laxative, using an average of three OTC products prior to consulting physician²

Public Health Cost

- Individuals suffering from chronic constipation average 0.4 to 0.8 missed days of work or school per month³
- They report an average of 1.2 to 4.9 days of disrupted productivity per month³
- They report 4 days with personal activities (social gatherings, sporting events, family activities, hobbies) affected per month²
- Constipation is associated with higher use of outpatient services, imaging, and other diagnostic tests than the general population⁴
- Health care costs associated with constipation are estimated to be greater than \$230 million annually⁴

Community Perspective

“I see a patient with constipation at least once a week. Many of them have limited knowledge of OTC laxatives and aren’t sure of how to take them appropriately.”

- Dr. Maura Conway, DO

“I’ve struggled with constipation for years. I would say it has a huge impact on my quality of life. I think a pamphlet about constipation treatments could be very informative for patients.”

- Patient at Newtown Primary Care

Intervention and Methodology

- A single-page, trifold pamphlet describing the first-line lifestyle modification and over-the-counter laxatives for managing constipation was created
- The pamphlet also offers tips to implement the described lifestyle changes and safety information related to taking each laxative
- This pamphlet will be available in primary care office for patients to take home

Results

- The pamphlet is written in clear, straightforward language and designed to provide a concise overview of the first-line options for managing constipation

Over-the-counter Laxatives

If you've been eating a fiber-rich diet, staying hydrated, and exercising regularly but your constipation is still out of control, you may find some relief with laxatives:

Laxative Type	Common Brands and Names	How They Work
Bulk-forming laxatives	• Benefiber • Citrucel • FiberCon • Metamucil	Fiber products that draw in water and bulk up the stool
Stool softeners	• Colace • Surfak	Mix fluid into the stool, moistening and softening it
Lubricant laxatives	• Mineral Oil • Glycerin	Coat the stool, making it slippery and easy to pass
Osmotic laxatives	• Miralax • Milk of Magnesia	Draw water into the intestines, making the stool soft and easy to pass
Stimulant laxatives	• Dulcolax • Fleet • Senokot • Ex-Lax	Cause the bowel to squeeze, moving the stool out

Important Information on Side effects and Safety

Laxative Type	Side Effects and Safe Use
Bulk-forming laxatives	Drink lots of water and gradually increase how much you take to reduce cramping, bloating, and gas
Stool softeners	Prolonged use may result in electrolyte imbalances and vitamin deficiencies
Lubricant laxatives	Prolonged use may result in vitamin deficiencies and decrease absorption of certain prescription drugs
Osmotic laxatives	Drink lots of water. Prolonged use may result in cramps, diarrhea, bloating, gas, and electrolyte imbalances
Stimulant laxatives	Prolonged use may result in the bowel losing its natural ability to squeeze and push out stool

Questions?
Contact your primary care physician or visit one of the following resources:
www.familydoctor.org
www.gi.org/patients
www.patient.gastro.org

Managing Constipation

A guide to lifestyle changes and over-the-counter laxatives




What is Constipation?

Constipation is a common problem that can have many different definitions. How often each person has bowel movements varies, but they should be soft and easy to pass. You may be constipated if:

- You are having fewer bowel movements than is usual for you
- You are having fewer than 3 bowel movements per week
- Your stool is hard, small, or dry
- You are straining and experiencing painful bowel movements



How do I treat or prevent constipation?

There are many non-medication options that are effective in treating and preventing constipation. Here are some everyday tips to help treat or prevent constipation:

- Eat fiber-rich foods**
 - Check out the next page for more information about fiber and what kind of foods are rich in fiber
- Drink plenty of fluids**
 - There is no "one-size-fits-all" amount of water to drink
 - Many sources recommend drinking 6-10 glasses per day
- Stay active**
 - Try to exercise for at least 30 minutes a day, at least 5 times a week



What foods are fiber-rich?



Fiber is a part of plants that our bodies cannot digest. It is an important part of our diet because it adds bulk to stool and holds water, making stools soft and easy to pass. Some examples of foods you can eat that are high in fiber include:

- Fruits and vegetables**
 - Try having fruits for dessert
 - Fresh produce contains more fiber than juice or canned
- Beans, lentils, and chickpeas**
 - These can be used as alternatives to meat 2-3 times per week
- Whole grains**
 - Choose whole grain bread instead of white bread
 - Try brown rice instead of white rice

Evaluation of Effectiveness and Limitations

- Patients who receive the pamphlet may be surveyed quantitatively on a Likert 1-5 scale on the effectiveness of the pamphlet and qualitatively on open-response feedback for future improvement.
- Another potential method for evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention is a longitudinal study comparing the rates of office visits and GI referrals for patients who received the pamphlet vs those who did not.
- The timespan for this project was unfortunately limited to 5 weeks, so further evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness could not be carried out.

Recommendations for Future Interventions

- Distribute the pamphlet to other offices, community centers, and pharmacies within the community
- Collaborate with gastroenterology offices to create educational resources for patients who require therapy beyond first-line options

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