

Ask Leyla: What's causing my constipation, and how can I relieve it?

written by Leyla Muedin MS, RD, CDN | March 8, 2016

Q: I've been experiencing occasional bouts of constipation. What could be causing them, and how can I find relief? Ideally, I'd like to know of any changes I could make that would help treat the root of the problem, rather than only treating the symptoms as they arise.

A: There are many reasons for constipation. Let's explore some:

Are you getting enough fiber? Up to 35 grams per day for adults is the recommendation. Along with vegetables, fruits, nuts and whole grains, the addition of flax meal or chia seeds can help achieve bowel regularity.

Are you drinking enough water? Yes, fiber is important but it won't work and may exacerbate constipation if you're not committed to drinking enough water. Eight, eight-ounces glasses of pure filtered water each day should be enough. And always be ruled by your thirst—drink more when thirsty. Beverages that are NOT caffeinated, such as a cup of herbal tea, can count as a serving of water.

Some people eat heroic amounts of fiber but still don't find relief. Then they try a probiotic and voila, constipation is abated. You just needed some beneficial bacteria taking up residence in your gut to help promote peristalsis. Normal bowel function can also be attained with the inclusion of prebiotics and enzymes.

Skipped meals or irregular mealtimes are common causes of constipation. Every time we eat and drink is an opportunity for peristalsis in the gut (moving things along). But when we skip a meal or have irregular mealtimes, peristalsis can slow down and become irregular—hence irregular bowel function. Let me take this opportunity to say that being too busy to eat is not acceptable. If this is you, you are likely ignoring Nature's call to go to the bathroom as well—something you should never do.

Dairy allergy can presents itself as constipation in children and adults. Try eliminating all dairy to see if it makes a difference. Note that hard cheeses on their own tend to be constipating.

BRAT foods: That's the acronym for bananas, rice (white only), applesauce, tea (regular) and toast. These foods are binding and often recommended for those with the opposite problem: diarrhea. Remove the BRAT foods from your diet and see if relief awaits you.

Some people can't tolerate raw nuts. They contain trypsin inhibitors which inhibit our digestive juices causing constipation. Eat roasted nuts instead.

A simple way to roast nuts is in a dry skillet over medium heat. Seven to ten minutes should do the trick. Roasting deactivates the trypsin inhibitors.

Are you gluten or wheat sensitive? I've had many clients tell me their digestion becomes sluggish when they consume wheat or other gluten grains (rye, barley, spelt, triticale, kamut). Try eliminating these grains and see if you find relief.

Are you sedentary? Our bodies need regular movement in the form of daily exercise. Constipation is often alleviated once you undertake an exercise program.

Are you taking a calcium or iron supplement? These are notorious for causing constipation. Make sure you're taking enough magnesium to help counteract this effect from supplemental calcium. As for iron, ask your healthcare practitioner for a gentler form.

Do you have hypothyroidism? Constipation is a classic symptom of underactive thyroid. Ask your doctor to check your thyroid function. You may need thyroid replacement or have your dose readjusted if you already take thyroid medication.

To your health!