

## Ask The Experts

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# How do I get to the bottom of constipation?

**Q** My 75-year-old mother gets constipation all the time. But when I get her to eat oatmeal, she ends up passing motion several times a day. Why does this happen and how can this problem be solved?

**A** Constipation is a symptom and not a disease. It refers to:

- Difficulty in passing stools (for example, when it is too hard and requires a person to strain excessively);
- A reduction in frequency of stools; or
- Both.

In general, a normal bowel habit ranges from up to three times a day to once every three days.

One does not need to move one's bowels daily if one does not have the urge to do so and has no discomfort.

### More common in seniors

Many of the causes of constipation tend to be more common among the elderly.

The causes include:

- An imbalanced diet (such as eating too little or too much fibre);
- Side effects of drugs (for example, anti-depressants and anti-psychotics);
- Metabolic (hormone-related) conditions — such as too little thyroid hormone (hypothyroidism), or excessive calcium levels (hypercalcaemia) in patients with chronic kidney disease;

- Physical inactivity, especially among the elderly with physical disabilities that make them home- or bed-bound; and
- Colorectal cancer.

### What to eat

Your mum's example highlights the need to understand one's body and tolerance to various food groups.

Oatmeal is rich in fibre and can help with bowel movements.

In this case, passing motion several times a day is fine if she does not feel any pain or bloating; and that stools are formed and not loose (diarrhoea).

However, if eating oatmeal has resulted in diarrhoea or discomfort, then she should stop or reduce the amount of oatmeal intake, and observe for an improvement.

Once her bowel movements return to the acceptable range, there is no need to make further changes.

More importantly, identify the cause of the constipation from the list of causes mentioned earlier, or the condition will not get better. It may even be from eating too much dietary fibre.

It is crucial to eat a balanced diet of all food groups and not focus too much on just dietary fibre (which includes oatmeal, vegetables and fruits) because an excess of any food groups (fibre included) has side effects.

Note that if constipation is left untreated, it often leads to unnecessary consumption of more medications, which can worsen the situation.

### When to see a doctor

If one's constipation worsens — such as getting more difficult to pass motion, alternating with diarrhoea, or passing loose stools associated with blood (stale or fresh) — one must seek medical attention.

It is important to ensure that life-threatening causes (such as colorectal cancer) are ruled out and the underlying causes are treated accordingly.



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