

Constipation in Pregnancy

Constipation is a common problem for women during pregnancy and often after childbirth. Pregnancy hormones can slow down your digestion, meaning stools can take longer to pass. This can cause constipation, excess gas and bloating. Other influences include sedentary behaviour and some medications e.g. iron tablets.

The 3 'F's' can help to combat constipation: **Fibre + Fluids + Fitness.**

Correct toilet positioning can also help to combat constipation.

1. Eat a high fibre diet:

Fibre is a type of carbohydrate that is not digested or absorbed in the body. It absorbs fluid and therefore helps to make our stools soft and more bulky (easier to pass). Eating enough fibre has been shown to reduce the risk of colon cancer, high cholesterol and heart disease. It also helps the growth of good bacteria in your gut. Because of the hormonal changes which cause your gut to slow down in pregnancy, your fibre requirement increases. If you are increasing the amount of fibre in your diet, make sure you do so gradually. It's also important to increase your intake of water alongside this.

Choose wholegrain foods at each meal

| Good carbohydrate food to choose: | |
|--|--|
| Wholegrain or wholemeal breads, wraps, pita bread, chapatti Rye bread | High fibre breakfast cereal (contain at least 6g of fibre per 100g) e.g. Porridge, Shredded Wheat, Weetabix, Bran, Muesli, Granola |
| Boiled, baked potatoes or sweet potatoes with their skin | Wholegrain noodles (not instant or "Pot Noodles") |
| Whole-wheat pasta | Whole-wheat cous cous, quinoa or brown rice |

Aim to eat 5-7 servings of fruit and vegetables every day.

- Aim to have ½ your plate made up of fruit or vegetables at each main meal
- Keep the skins on fruit and vegetables where possible
- Boost fibre in your meals by adding beans, lentils, chickpeas, nuts and seeds
- Snack on fruit or raw vegetable sticks
- Include 2 kiwis per day to help soften stools

Eat regular meals and snacks

Eating regular meals helps to keep your gut moving and can help to prevent constipation. It also gives you more opportunities to fit all the fibre you need into your day. You should aim to eat three main meals (aim for 5-6 hours apart) with 2-3 nourishing snacks per day in between your meals. Try to avoid skipping a meal.

Add milled flaxseed or linseeds

Milled flaxseed and linseed are an excellent source of fibre and for many women can help to improve constipation. These can be added to cereal, porridge, yoghurt, puree fruit or smoothies.

It is recommended that you start with a small amount of milled flax or linseed daily and increase the amount of milled flax or linseeds slowly every two days. Start with a small amount (2 teaspoons).

For every 3 teaspoons of linseed taken, you should drink an extra glass of fluid (150mls).

If linseed is added without extra fluid, this can worsen constipation.

| Days | Amount of Linseed |
|--------------|---|
| Days 1 & 2 | 2 teaspoons at breakfast |
| Days 3 & 4 | 2 teaspoons at breakfast + before bed |
| Days 5 & 6 | 2 teaspoons at breakfast + evening meal + before bed |
| Days 7 & 8 | 3 teaspoons at breakfast + 2 teaspoons at evening meal + before bed |
| Days 9 & 10 | 3 teaspoons at breakfast + evening meal + 2 teaspoons before bed |
| Days 11 & 12 | 3 teaspoons at breakfast + evening meal + before bed |

How do I know how much is enough?

Stop increasing the dose and continue with the amount that:

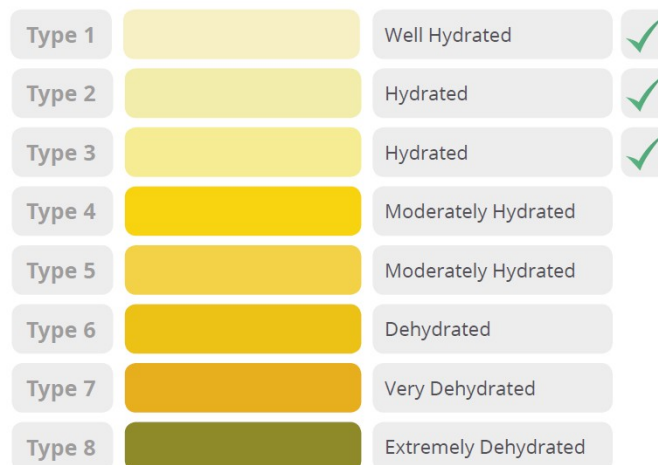
- Helps you pass a stool each day
- Makes your stools soft and comfortable to pass.

Note: You may experience an increase in the amount of wind you pass.

2. Drink enough fluid:

Fibre needs to absorb water in order to pass through your body. If you are increasing your fibre intake it's important to increase fluids too. Aim for at least 2 litres of fluid per day in pregnancy.

- Drink water, herbal teas, milk, 100% fruit juice or no added sugar cordial.
- If your urine is pale yellow in colour it's a good sign you are drinking enough water
- Some women find a warm drink in the morning helps trigger a bowel movement



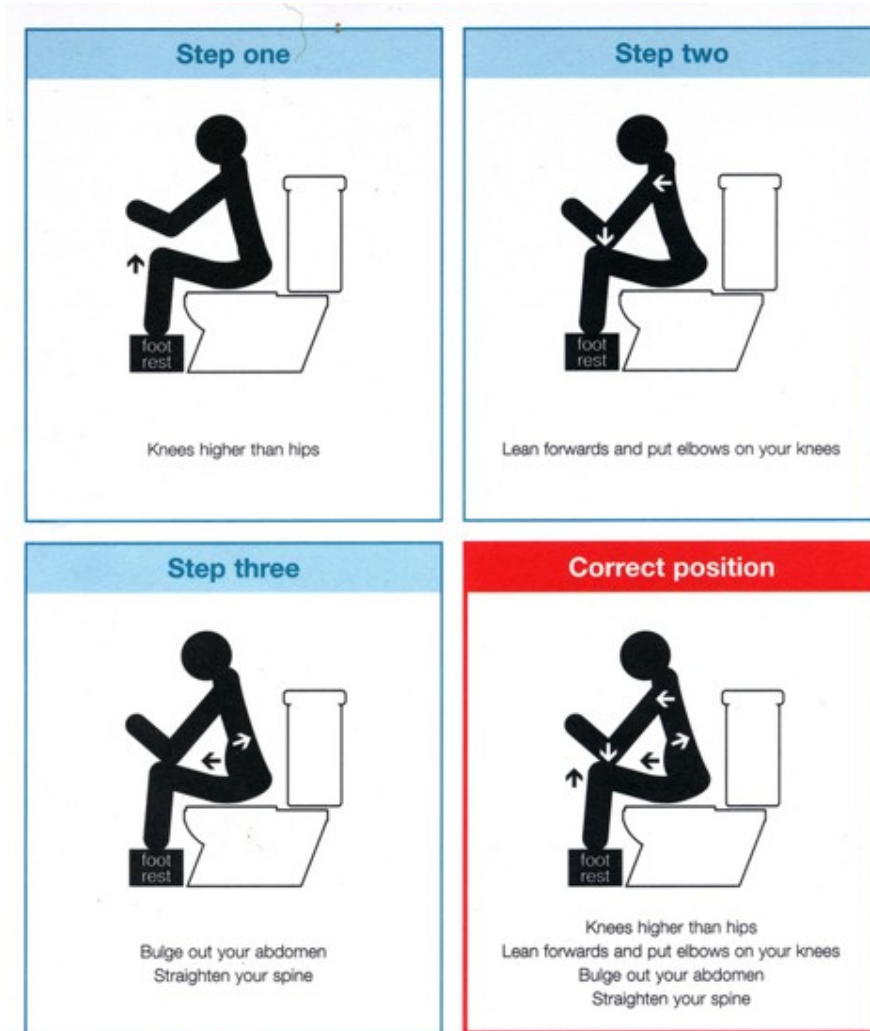
3. Increase your Fitness:

When we do physical activity, we increase blood flow around the body – this includes our bowels.

- Aim for 30-45 minutes gentle physical activity per day.
- Always ask your doctor or midwife if you are starting a new exercise.

Toilet Positioning


To protect your pelvic floor muscles, do not strain when you empty your bladder and bowels. The best position to sit on the toilet is pictured below. When you are in the correct position, it can help your muscles to relax, making it easier to open your bowels. A stool or foot rest can help to achieve the correct position.



Reproduced by the kind permission of Ray Addison, Nurse Consultant in Bladder and Bowel Dysfunction.
Wendy Ness, Colorectal Nurse Specialist.

- Always sit on the toilet seat. Do not hover above it, even when just emptying your bladder
- Use a foot stool or raise your heels so that your knees are higher than your hips
- Lean forward, with your feet apart and your elbows on your knees
- Breathe in and let your tummy gently swell out
- Breathe out as you push down towards your back passage
- Your tummy should stay braced out and don't allow your tummy to suck back in again
- Repeat as necessary
- Allow yourself time, do not rush

Bristol Stool Chart

| | | |
|--------|---|--|
| Type 1 |  | Separate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass) |
| Type 2 |  | Sausage-shaped but lumpy |
| Type 3 |  | Like a sausage but with cracks on its surface |
| Type 4 |  | Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft |
| Type 5 |  | Soft blobs with clear-cut edges (passed easily) |
| Type 6 |  | Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool |
| Type 7 |  | Watery, no solid pieces. Entirely Liquid |

How often you pass a stool is different for everyone. Most people pass a stool between three times a day to three times a week. When you pass a stool less often than normal, or it changes in texture from your normal, you may be constipated. A normal bowel motion should be well formed, soft and easy to pass, like type 3 and 4 on the Bristol Stool Chart.

If you have tried to implement some of the recommended dietary changes and you are still struggling with constipation, or you are passing bowel movements similar to type 1 or type 2 on the Bristol Stool Chart, you may need to seek medical support.

High Fibre Meal Ideas

Breakfast

- Porridge topped with berries/banana and nuts/flaxseed
 - Wholegrain toast with scrambled eggs, mushrooms & tomatoes
 - Wholegrain cereal e.g. Weetabix, All Bran, or Shredded Wheat with fruit and seeds
 - Wholegrain toast with nut butter and banana
 - Beans on toast
 - Overnight oats
- And 1 glass of fortified orange/prune juice

Lunch

- Wholegrain sandwich/wrap with hummus, falafel and veg / chicken, cheese & salad
- Vegetable/Lentil soup with wholegrain bread + a piece of fruit
- Baked potato topped with beans and cheese or tuna, sweet corn & low fat mayonnaise + side salad
- Wholegrain pasta with tomato sauce, roasted vegetables and mozzarella
- Burrito bowl – Brown rice, lettuce, tomatoes, sweet corn, black beans, chicken & guacamole/salsa

Dinner

- Stir-fry with toasted cashew nuts and wholegrain noodles
- Chicken & chickpea curry with brown rice
- Homemade burger in wholegrain bun, homemade potato wedges (with skins) & side salad
- Chili con-carne (add kidney beans and/or lentils) with rice and guacamole
- Lentil dahl with brown rice and a side of veg
- Meat/chicken with baby boiled potatoes (with skin), carrots & broccoli (or 2 veg of your choice)

Snack ideas:

- Yogurt with berries & chopped nuts
- Piece of fruit
- Wholegrain crackers & small portion of cheese
- Trail mix (nuts & dried fruit)
- Hummus and veg sticks/wholegrain pitta
- Oat cakes with banana and peanut butter or avocado
- Small bowl of homemade vegetable or lentil soup
- Chia seed pudding

