ASK THE Doctor

Q. Some of my medications cause me to have severe constipation. I've tried fiber, stool softeners, and laxatives, but none seem to help. And laxatives cause cramping. Can you suggest an alternative?

ConstiPATion

A. Constipation is a common-enough side effect from medications. The first step to resolving the problem is to talk with your prescribing physician. Once your doctor knows about this untoward effect of the medication, potentially he or she can adjust the dosage or prescribe another medication – ideally one that does not cause the same difficulty.

Another common – and overlooked – solution to chronic constipation is to drink plenty of water. Not tea, coffee, or soft drinks. Just water. Add a squeeze of lemon or a splash of fresh fruit juice if needed. Your daily goal should be a minimum of eight 8-ounce glasses per day. Another important solution to constipation is getting exercise. Even just brisk walking daily a minimum of 30 minutes a day can help with bowel regularity.

Psyllium seed husk is a high-fiber product that helps prevent constipation and helps lower your cholesterol. Drink one tablespoon stirred into a glass of water daily – or as often as twice a day, if needed.

Many foods are natural stool softeners, for example: almonds, apple-pear juice, dried apricots, avocados, dates, endive, figs, flaxseed, grapes, mangoes, olives, papayas, parsley, persimmons, pineapple, prunes and prune juice, soybeans, turnips, walnuts, and watercress.

Foods that act as natural laxatives are rhubarb, aloe vera juice, licorice, and olive oil.

Be careful with laxatives (even with foods that act as laxatives, like aloe vera juice). It's easy to overdo it. The body can get used to them, and when that happens, they lose their laxative effect.

To help the constipation, you might also lessen your intake of cheese, meat, and all highly processed foods. Aim for 5–9 servings of fruit and vegetables daily and 3 or more servings of whole grains daily, such as brown rice, high-fiber cereal, whole-wheat breads, and oatmeal. Beans are also high in dietary fiber.

Constipation in and of itself (when not directly associated with taking a drug) may be a symptom associated with a specific disorder, such as celiac disease (or gluten intolerance). With gluten intolerance, constipation and other digestive symptoms can wreak havoc on the body until all wheat, oats, barley, and rye are removed from the diet. Irritable bowel syndrome is another common cause of constipation and severe cramping.

There are many medical causes of constipation. Hopefully for you, a talk with your doctor and a change in medication will stop the symptom. You're smart to try to resolve this soon. Constipation can seriously compromise your health if it goes on too long.

Resources:

1. *American Academy of Family Physicians. Dec. 2006. http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/common/digestive/basics/037.html*
2. *National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse. July 2007. http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/constipation/*

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