



## INTRODUCTION

Bowel habits are formed early in life. We may pick up poor habits and develop problems because we rarely talk about how to look after our bowels. Many people do not know that they have poor bowel habits or problems. Without treatment, these could lead to faecal incontinence (leakage from the bowel) in later life. Bowel problems affect many people. You can prevent or reduce these problems if you seek help early.

### 1 Good toileting habits

Everyone's bowel habits are different. Normal habits can range from 3 times a day to 3 times a week. Good toileting habits should include:

- Going to the toilet only when the urge to open your bowels is strong
- Correct posture when sitting on the toilet. This helps to empty the bowel
- Not straining. This leads to weak pelvic floor muscles and loss of bowel control.

How to sit correctly on the toilet:

- Lean forward slightly and rest your elbows on your knees
- Lift your heels so that your knees are higher than your hips. Think of being on tiptoes. A small stool or phone book under your feet may help
- Push your lower belly out. This helps to relax the muscles in your back passage.

### 2 Pelvic floor muscle training

Pelvic floor muscle training can help to control the opening of your back passage. This will help to prevent leakage of gas or faeces. These exercises should be done each day by men and women. For a pamphlet on pelvic floor muscle training, call the National Continence Helpline on Freecall™ 1800 330 066.

#### Diet, dietary fibre and fibre supplements

What we eat plays a vital role in how well our bowels work. Fibre is important for healthy bowels. It helps to improve bowel function by taking up water and making stools bulkier. There are two types of dietary fibre — soluble or insoluble. Most plant foods have both types. You should aim to eat both types each day.

**Insoluble fibre** helps speed up bowel motions. This means bowel actions will occur more often. Eat less of this fibre if you have loose stools. Eat more if you have constipation. Examples are: multigrain or wholegrain wheat, corn and rice cereals, bran, fibrous vegetables (carrots, celery), skins of fruit and vegetables.

**Soluble fibre** turns into a gel during digestion. It can help firm up loose stools. Examples are: oats, barley, rye, legumes (lentils and kidney beans), peeled fruits and vegetables.

Note that there are many types of fibre supplements, each with a different action. People may react differently to each type. Try a few to find what works best for you. Ask your GP or Pharmacist for advice. When taking any fibre, you must drink more water to help the fibre pass through your bowel.

#### Medications

Certain drugs can affect the bowel. Some can cause constipation while others can cause diarrhoea. If you have any concerns, ask your GP or Pharmacist for advice.

#### Lifestyle

Too much stress or too little activity can affect your bowel. Try to reduce stress, eat a healthy diet, drink 1.5 to 2 litres of water each day and exercise for 30 minutes each day. Walking is ideal.

## SUMMARY

The five most important steps you can take to improve your bowel function and bowel control are:

- 1 Good habits on the toilet.
- 2 Pelvic muscle training.
- 3 Check your diet and make changes if needed.
4. Understand how your medications work.
5. Check your lifestyle and make changes if needed.

### Food Chart

The following food chart lists foods that can cause or help reduce bowel problems. Use this as a guide and remember that foods can affect people differently.

#### Foods that can cause flatus (gas):

- Cabbage family vegetables (cabbage, Brussels sprouts, broccoli and cauliflower)
- Beans
- Onions
- Spinach
- Corn
- Radishes
- Cucumber
- Nuts
- Fizzy drinks
- Beer
- Dairy products
- Snacks and “sugar-free” foods that contain sorbitol (humectant, code 420)

#### Foods that can make bowel motions firmer and less frequent. (Eat less if you are constipated):

- Bananas
- Boiled rice (white)
- Pasta (white)
- White bread (not high fibre)
- Milk arrowroot biscuits
- Marshmallows (white only)
- Tapioca
- Peanut butter (smooth)
- Potatoes
- Cheese
- Yoghurt
- Pretzels

#### Foods that can make bowel motions softer and more frequent. (Eat less if you have loose stools):

- Vegetables (especially red capsicum, cabbage, onions, spinach, dried and fresh beans, peas, corn, Brussels sprouts and broccoli)
- Fruit (fresh, canned or dried) especially grapes and stone fruit such as apricots, peaches, plums, prunes
- Spices such as chilli and curry
- Garlic
- Bran, other high fibre cereals and breads such as multigrain, wholemeal, high fibre white)
- Fibre supplements
- Milk, cream, icecream
- Chocolate
- Nuts
- Popcorn
- Greasy foods
- Fruit juice especially orange, prune, grape
- Alcohol, especially beer and red wine
- Caffeine — coffee, tea, cola drinks, chocolate
- Snacks and “sugar-free” foods that contain sorbitol (humectant, code 420). This is used in diabetic lollies, chewing gum, mints, snack bars

### Useful contacts

#### National Continence Helpline — Phone: 1800 330 066

This service gives free advice about problems with the bowel or bladder.

#### Toilet Map Helpline — Phone: 1800 990 646

The National Public Toilet Map shows the location of more than 13,000 public toilets in Australian towns and cities. It includes rural areas and major travel routes. The Helpline can assist you to obtain maps. The internet site is [www.toiletmap.gov.au](http://www.toiletmap.gov.au)

Disclaimer: This fact sheet aims to give a general overview of how to improve bowel function. For specific problems, you should also seek advice from your GP.

