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Having regular bowel motions is part of being healthy. Bowel habits vary widely between individuals - for some people, being regular means having a bowel motion every day, for others, passing a motion every two days, or even less frequently, is regular for them. It is when changes occur to your bowel motions and their usual pattern, that you can consider you have constipation.

Most cases of constipation in adults are mild and occur infrequently. Usually it can be linked to lifestyle factors such as not eating enough fibre in your diet or drinking enough fluids and lack of physical activity. Not responding straight away to the urge to pass a bowel motion can lead to constipation. Some medicines, and some medical conditions, can also be the cause. People with emotional stress and worry can become constipated, and hormone changes during pregnancy can lead to women having problems passing bowel motions.

When you are constipated your stools can become hard and difficult to pass without straining. After passing a motion, you may feel that there is more still to pass, or you may have a feeling of blockage in the bowel. Regular straining to pass the stools can lead to haemorrhoids.

Before treating constipation with medicines, consider first making some simple lifestyle changes. Drink plenty of fluids (water is best), since fluids soften the stools and make them easier to pass. Six to eight glasses of water throughout the day is a good amount, more if you eat a lot of fibre. If you are constipated because you don't have enough fibre in your diet (adults should have about 18-30g fibre a day) then slowly, over a few weeks to prevent wind in the gut, increase the amount you eat to keep your bowel motions soft and easy to pass. Fresh fruit and vegetables, and whole grain cereals and breads, are good sources of fibre.

Being active and mobile is a way to prevent constipation, and having regular exercise, such as walking everyday, will get your bowels moving.

However, if these lifestyle measures do not work, or you have severe constipation, laxative medicines can help. There are many different types, each working in different ways. Some work quickly and others take a few days. Softeners work within a few hours on hard stools, stimulant-type laxatives work directly on the bowel to increase its activities in passing faeces. Other products act like fibre to bulk-up the stools for easy passing. These bulking-forming agents are good for long-term control of constipation and are not used for rapid relief. An interesting product is Phloe, a kiwifruit based capsule designed to promote regular and efficient bowel function. It contains enzymes to support bowel movement and the elimination of waste and toxins; fibre for bulk and pre-biotics to 'feed' the good bacteria in the gut and support a healthy gut flora. See www.phloe.co.nz for more information and their healthy bowel program.

However, if these measures don't help your constipation or it gets worse, or if you notice blood in the stools, have unexplained weight loss, fever, nausea or vomiting, you need to see your doctor. It is also important to note that using laxatives over long-term periods is not recommended unless under your Doctor's instructions.