Fibre & fluid for healthy bowels

Fibre helps to prevent constipation and keeps your bowels regular and healthy. Fibre comes from plant foods such as fruit, vegetables, breads, cereals, nuts and seeds.

Tips to prevent and help with constipation

Start a bowel routine
- Use the toilet when you feel the urge to move your bowels. If you hold on, you may need to strain later.
- The best time to go to the toilet is within two hours of waking and after breakfast.

Eat regular meals and snacks
- Eat three meals around the same time each day. Have high-fibre snacks between meals.
- Breakfast is particularly important because it gets your bowels moving.

Be physically active
Aim to be physically active most days for at least 30 minutes. Choose activities that you enjoy, like walking, dancing, swimming, golf, tennis and tai chi. Gardening and active work around the house also count as physical activity if they get you out of breath or sweaty.

Every day have at least six servings of grain foods
Choose mostly wholegrain and those naturally high in fibre, such as brown rice, wholegrain bread and porridge made with whole or rolled oats.

A serving is about the size of your closed fist.

Every day have at least five servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit
A serving is about a handful.

Drink at least eight cups of fluid daily
- You might need to drink more during hot weather and during or after physical activity.
- Try to make at least half of your fluid intake water. Milk, fruit juice, hot drinks, soup, jelly, custard and ice blocks also count as fluids.
- Check your urine to see if you’re drinking enough. Your urine should be clear or a pale lemon colour.
- See How to get enough to drink on HealthInfo (www.healthinfo.org.nz/How-to-get-enough-to-drink.htm).
Tips to get more fibre

You may need more fibre to help your bowels move. To avoid getting stomach pains or bloating, it's best to increase your fibre intake gradually and make sure you drink plenty of fluids. Choose one or two tips at a time from the following list.

- Start the day with a high-fibre breakfast cereal. Try Weet-Bix, bran-based and oat-based cereals or porridge. Add fresh, canned or stewed fruit to your cereal.
- Choose wholemeal or wholegrain breads.
- Have wholegrain crackers or wholemeal bread instead of biscuits.
- Check food labels for fibre content. Read the nutrition information panel on food packets and choose foods with at least 5 g of fibre per 100 g of food.
- Use wholemeal flour and rolled oats in baking and cooking.
- Add extra vegetables to soups and stews.
- Add lentils, split peas or chickpeas to soups and casseroles.
- Add raw or roasted nuts and seeds to salads, breakfast cereal and stir-fries to add some crunch.
- Try baked beans or a salad made from canned mixed beans.
- Leave skins on fruits and vegetables. Wash them well first.
- Try brown rice and wholemeal pasta.
- Try quinoa (a grain) in place of rice or add to salads and stir-fries.
- Choose high-fibre snacks such as a small handful (30 g) of raw or roasted nuts without added fat, hummus on wholegrain crackers or fresh fruit. Kiwifruit are particularly helpful for constipation.

If you need more fibre to help your bowels move, ask your GP or practice nurse for advice on a fibre supplement.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed July 2021.