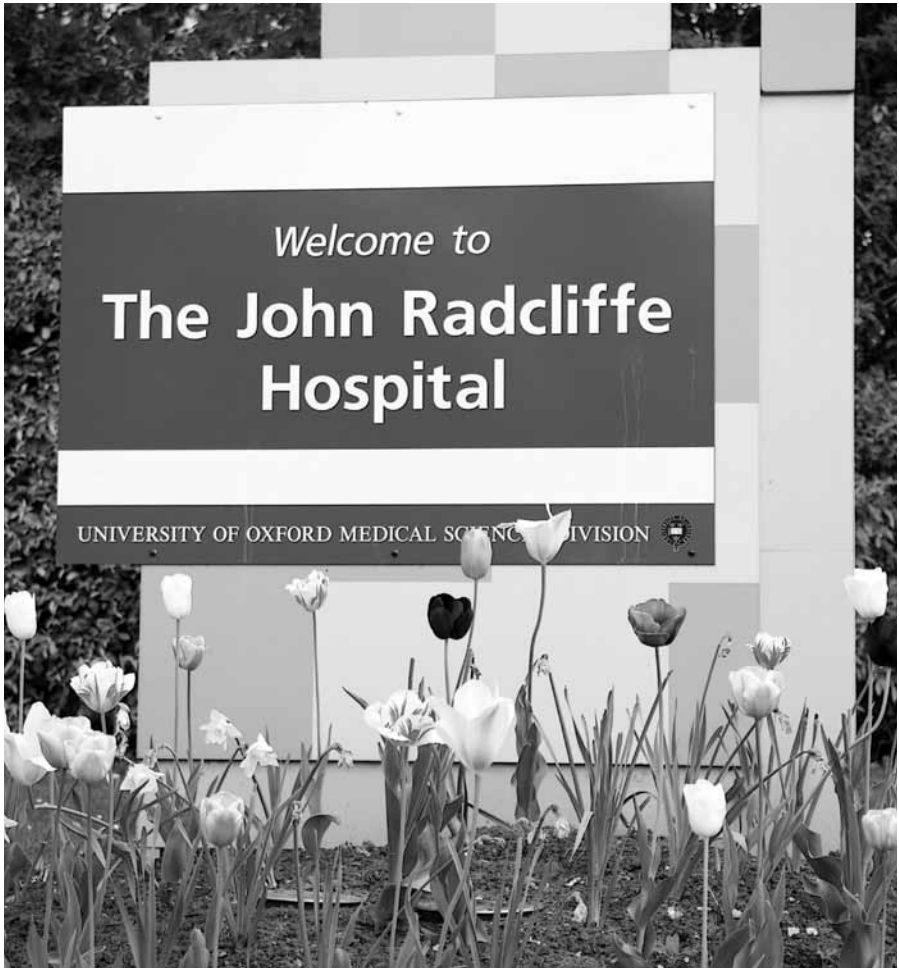


Surgical Emergency Unit

Constipation

Information for Patients



What is constipation?

Constipation is a common condition that affects people of all ages. It can mean that you are not able to open your bowels as regularly as usual. It can also cause your stools (poo) to be hard and lumpy.

The severity of constipation varies from person to person. Most people only get constipated for a short time but for others, constipation can become a long-term (chronic) condition that causes pain and misery and affects quality of life.

How is constipation defined?

Doctors define constipation in a number of ways:

- Opening your bowels less than three times a week
- Often needing to strain to open your bowels
- Passing a hard or pellet-like stools.

Causes

Most cases of constipation are not caused by a specific condition and it may be difficult to identify the exact cause. However, several factors can increase your chances of having constipation, including:

- not eating enough fibre, such as fruit, vegetables and cereals
- pregnancy
- a change in your routine or lifestyle, such as a change in your eating habits
- having limited privacy when using the toilet
- ignoring the urge to pass stools
- immobility or lack of exercise
- not drinking enough fluids
- being underweight or overweight
- medications
- anxiety or depression.

Symptoms

Difficulty passing stools –

When you are constipated, you feel that passing stools has become more difficult. It may seem more difficult because your stools are:

- dry, hard and lumpy
- abnormally large
- abnormally small

As well as causing a change in your normal bowel habits, constipation can also cause the following symptoms:

- stomach ache and cramps
- feeling bloated
- feeling nauseous
- loss of appetite

Treatment

Treatment for constipation depends on the cause, how long you have had the condition and how severe your symptoms are. In many cases it is possible to relieve symptoms through dietary and lifestyle changes.

Lifestyle advice

Your GP can advise you about how you can change your diet and lifestyle, which may resolve your constipation without the use of medication. Some ways you can help treat your constipation are listed below.

- Increase your daily intake of fibre. You should eat at least 18-30g of fibre a day. High-fibre foods include fruit, vegetables and cereals.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Get more exercise by going for a daily walk or run.
- If your constipation is causing pain or discomfort, you may

want to take a painkiller. Make sure you always follow the dosage instructions carefully.

- When you feel the urge to have your bowels open, go to the toilet—do not delay.

If these diet and lifestyle changes do not help, your GP may prescribe an oral laxative.

Laxatives

Laxatives are a type of medicine that help you to move your bowels. There are several different types and each one has a different effect on your digestive system.

Bulk-forming laxatives – Your GP will normally start you on a bulk-forming laxative such as ispaghula husk. These laxatives make your stools denser and softer, which means they should be easier to pass.

Osmotic laxatives – If your stools remain hard after you have taken a bulk-forming laxative, your GP may prescribe an osmotic laxative instead. Osmotic laxatives such as lactulose increase the amount of fluid in your bowels. This helps to stimulate your body to pass stools and also softens stools.

Stimulant laxatives – If your stools are soft but you still have difficulty passing them, you may be prescribed a stimulant laxative such as senna. This laxative stimulates the muscles that line your digestive tract, helping them to move stools and waste products along your large intestine to your anus.

How long will I take laxatives for?

If you have only experienced constipation for a short time, your GP will normally advise you to stop taking the laxative once your stools are soft and easily passed. However, if you have constipation due to a medicine or an underlying medical condition, you may have to take laxatives for much longer, possibly many months or even years.

Surgical Emergency Unit

John Radcliffe Hospital
Headley Way
Headington
Oxford
OX3 9DU

Phone: 01865221822

Fax: 01865857953

If you need an interpreter or need
a document in another language,
large print, Braille or audio version,
please call **01865 221473** or email
PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk

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