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13 Common Foods That Can Cause



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Most health authorities define constipation as having fewer than three bowel movements in a week. In my experience as a health care professional, I believe this to be a gross underestimate and a telling indication of just how unhealthy the average American diet has become. You should have a minimum of two bowel movements every day. A healthy bowel movement should be soft, smooth, and easy to pass. If you have fewer than two per day, or if you find yourself straining, then you are likely constipated.

Foods That Cause Constipation

While many things can cause constipation, a poor diet is by far the most common.^[1] The [typical American diet](#) is not only deficient in fiber, but it's also loaded with constipation-causing foods. A diet that is low in fiber and high in meat, dairy, refined sugar, and processed foods can affect regularity. With that in mind, update your meal plan and cut out some of these constipation-causing foods.

1. Dairy

Sorry, Wisconsin, but too much dairy can cause constipation. On their own, milk, frozen yogurt, ice cream, sour cream, cheese, and other dairy foods do not provide fiber. Dairy also contains lactose, a type of sugar that many people have difficulty digesting, leading to abdominal bloating and gas.^[2, 3]

Yogurt is a special case. Some yogurts are fortified with added fiber, but I'd avoid most commercial yogurts as they tend to be startlingly high in refined sugar. As a rule of thumb, if you see it on a TV commercial and it has a celebrity spokesperson, assume that there are better options. Unsweetened yogurts made with traditional methods are a good source of probiotics and a healthier choice.

2. Prepackaged and Heavily Processed Foods

Whether you call them TV dinners, frozen dinners, ready meals, or microwave meals—prepackaged foods are terrible for your colon. They are typically low in fiber and high in fat and salt. Excess salt traps water in your cells, which means your colon doesn't have access to the fluids it needs to pass waste smoothly.^[4]

3. Gluten

About 1.8 million Americans have celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder that damages the small intestine when it encounters gluten. Another 18 million have a [gluten sensitivity](#). If you have one of these conditions, any food made with wheat, rye, or barley can cause bloating, abdominal pain, and constipation.^[5]

4. Alcohol

A night of drinking may result in diarrhea for some, but in the long-term, alcohol dehydrates the body, leaving your feces dry, hard, and difficult to pass. Alcohol consumption can also trigger other constipation-causing conditions like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).^[6] Alcohol abuse can lead to pancreatitis, a condition in which the pancreas becomes swollen and tender. Pancreatitis can cause abdominal pain, bloating, and constipation.^[7] If this wasn't enough, alcohol also wreaks havoc [with your intestinal microbiota](#), further compromising your gastrointestinal system.

5. Fried Foods

Fried foods are very high in saturated fat and rather scant on dietary fiber. A 2015 review found that a diet heavy in saturated fats is associated with significantly higher rates of constipation. Greasy foods are also more difficult to digest and move sluggishly through your digestive tract.^[8]

6. Meat

Meat is [devastating to colon health](#). Meat-eaters are up to 50% more likely to develop colon cancer than vegetarians, and the risk is even greater when you eat nitrate-laden processed meats like sausage and lunchmeat. Fatty red meat significantly slows down your digestive process and causes constipation.^[9]

7. Caffeine

Caffeine is a stimulant, which means it can cause diarrhea. However, it's also a desiccant, which means it dehydrates your body. Caffeine causes your kidneys to flush water from your circulation. When you run a water deficit in your body to maintain normal blood volume, your colon absorbs the water it needs from digesting food. This leaves you with harder stool that is difficult to pass.^[10]

8. Refined Sugar

There are a lot of good reasons to [avoid refined sugar](#). Sugar is a major contributor to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. The average American consumes 22 teaspoons of sugar every day, which equals about 350 (empty) calories.^[11] Sugary beverages like soft drinks and energy drinks are by far the biggest source of sugar in the American diet, accounting for more than a third of the added sugar consumed nationally.^[12]

Since sugar is closely tied to devastating conditions like heart disease and diabetes, it should come as no surprise that sugar affects colon health as well. A diet high in sugar contributes to inflammatory bowel diseases like Crohn's and IBS.^[13] Sugar also increases your risk of developing colon and rectal cancer.^[14]

9. Chocolate

Sorry, chocolate lovers. While there are [many health benefits associated with dark chocolate](#), avoid it if you seek constipation relief. In particular, milk chocolate is high in sugar and fat, and the associated complications that come with those. The dark variety has less sugar, but should still be avoided in times of constipation. Chocolate also frequently contains caffeine, worsening the issue.

10. Fast Food

A 2016 study found that eating fast food leads to a spike in gastrointestinal disorders. Like fried foods, fast food is big on saturated fats and short on fiber. Skip the hamburgers, cheeseburgers, and french fries. If you want good food fast, carry some raw fruit or nuts with you. Fruit and nuts are high in fiber, and you don't even have to wait in line at the drive-through.^[15]

11. Unripe Bananas

This may be a surprising entry because bananas are one of the best laxative foods. Ripe bananas produce pectin, a type of dietary fiber, which helps keep you regular. Unripe, green bananas, however, have not yet started producing this nutrient. Unripe bananas are difficult to digest and can cause constipation, particularly in children.^[16]

12. Calcium and Iron Supplements

Certain vitamins and minerals, even essential nutrients like iron and calcium, can cause constipation when used unwisely. Your body definitely needs calcium and iron, but too much from the wrong sources can cause constipation, upset stomach, and other side effects. Avoid calcium-carbonate antacids. Only take iron supplements if you have a diagnosed [iron deficiency](#), and do your research to find the safest option as [not all iron supplements are equal](#).^[17, 18]

13. Medication

While not technically food, we should talk about medications. Antidepressants, for example, are notorious for their noxious side effects, so it should come as no surprise that certain types can leave you feeling backed up. Grappling with constipation is the last thing you need if you're already struggling.^[19]

How to Prevent Occasional Constipation

Your first inclination when dealing with occasional constipation may be to reach for some over-the-counter stimulant laxatives, but I strongly caution against this. Laxative overuse can lead to dependency, making your intestines entirely reliant on medications for a bowel movement.^[20] Fortunately, other than avoiding the foods that cause constipation, there are a few other things you can do to prevent it from ever becoming an issue in the first place.

Eat More High Fiber Foods

Increasing your intake of high fiber foods greatly reduces your chances of developing constipation and other colon-related issues. There are two kinds of fiber—soluble and insoluble. Soluble fiber dissolves easily in water and takes on a soft, gel-like consistency in your gut. Insoluble fiber passes through the intestines almost unchanged. The bulk and texture of fiber encourages soft, healthy stools that are easy to pass. You can find both soluble and insoluble fiber in fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, and whole grains.

Drink More (of the Right) Fluids

While milk, coffee, black tea, soft drinks, and alcohol all provoke constipation, drinking plenty of the right kind of fluids will hydrate your body and get things moving a little more easily. Excellent options include herbal tea, natural fruit juices with no added sugar, [detox waters](#), and, most importantly of all, purified water. It's crucial to drink plenty of clean, clear water. You should consume at least half your weight in ounces every day. In other words, if you weigh 160 pounds, then you should drink a minimum of 80 ounces every day.

Manage Stress Effectively

Stress isn't just all in your head—it affects your body, too. Stress is a part of life; there's no changing that. You can, however, learn to [deal with stress constructively](#). There are many methods to do this, more than I can discuss in a single article, and different methods work better for different folks.

I recommend [meditation](#). Meditation is a powerful, free therapy that helps relieve stress, soothe emotions, tune out distractions, and encourage clear, positive thinking.

Exercise Regularly

Constipated? Shake it loose. A sedentary lifestyle can contribute to constipation.^[21] And, no, walking from your car to your couch doesn't count as exercise. Try to get at least 45 minutes of semi-intensive aerobic exercise at least three times a week. The more you move, the more you inspire your bowels to move.

Take Probiotics

Somewhere around 100 trillion microorganisms live in your gut right now, but that's nothing to fret over. These beneficial microorganisms are all part of a healthy, normal gastrointestinal system and [are essential](#) to your body's function and overall health. Probiotics are the good guys you eat every day in foods like raw vegetables, fruit, and fermented foods. Consuming [probiotic foods](#) like kimchi, kombucha, tempeh, and sauerkraut can keep your gut microbiota healthy, aid digestion, and promote normal bowel movements.^[22, 23]

Do a Colon Cleanse

Every day, your body encounters millions of harmful compounds from pollution, pesticides, vehicle emissions, PCBs, cigarette smoke, VOCs, chemicals, prescription drugs, harmful organisms, toxic metals, and countless other hazardous substances. You can take steps to reduce your exposure to toxins in your life, but you can never eliminate them entirely. Over time, these agents accumulate to hazardous levels and cause more serious health concerns.